

**Katya Kabanova** premièred in 1921 at the National Theatre in Brno

LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854-1928)

Libretto by Janáček after Ostrovsky's play *The Thunderstorm*

Running time: 98 minutes

Performed at Glyndebourne in 1988 (with the London Philharmonic)

Dikoj, a rich merchant	<i>Donald Adams</i>	Bass
Boris, his nephew	<i>Barry McCauley</i>	Tenor
Váňa Kudrjáš, clerk to Dikoj	<i>John Graham-Hill</i>	Tenor
Kabanicha, a rich merchant's widow	<i>Felicity Palmer</i>	Contralto
Tichon, her son	<i>Ryland Davies</i>	Tenor
Katya Kabanova, Tichon's wife	<i>Nancy Gustafson</i>	Soprano
Varvara, foster child in the Kabanov household	<i>Louise Walker</i>	Mezzo
Conductor	<i>Andrew Davis</i>	
Stage Director	<i>Nikolaus Lehnhoff</i>	

### Synopsis

*The small town of Kalinovo on the banks of the Volga in Russia around 1860*



**ACT 1 SCENE 1:** In a public park Boris tells his uncle's clerk Kudrjáš about his passion for Katya Kabanova who's married. They both watch the Kabanov family returning from church. The family is at loggerheads: Katya – a woman of great sweetness of nature – is married to Tichon, a weak merchant under the thumb of his domineering mother Kabanicha. He's unable to stop his mother tyrannizing his wife, and he meekly complies when she orders him off on a business trip.

**ACT 1 SCENE 2:** In a room in the Kabanov house, Katya tells Varvara about herself. Her narration is initially joyful as she remembers church-going and her home life, but it clouds over as she tells Varvara about troubling dreams, and her guilty love for Boris. Tichon comes in, ready for his departure. Katya is anxious because of the tensions that might arise during his absence. She begs him not to go, or to take her with him. But Tichon is helpless against his mother, who orders him to extract humiliating promises of good behaviour from Katya during his absence. Tichon departs.

**ACT 2 SCENE 1** Towards evening on the same day, in another room in the Kabanov home: Kabanicha reprimands Katya for not showing more grief at Tichon's departure. Varvara has already planned an assignation between Katya and Boris, and she gives Katya the garden gate key that she's stolen from Kabanicha. Boris' unpleasant uncle Dikoj visits Kabanicha. He derives pleasure from confessing his weaknesses to Kabanicha, and receiving her scolding.

*[Interval]*

**ACT 2 SCENE 2:** On a sunny evening Kudrjáš sings a song, while waiting for Varvara in a hollow overlooked by the Kabanov garden. He's surprised when Boris appears, and tells him about his imminent assignation with Katya. Varvara joins them before she runs off with Kudrjáš. Katya meets Boris, terrified by the 'sin' she's committing. Their courtship is interrupted by the other couple, whose more light-hearted relationship takes centre stage, with fragments of Boris and Katya's passionate love duet wafting in from offstage. Kudrjáš calls Boris and Katya when it's time for the lovers to part. The scene ends with another 'folksong' for Kudrjáš and Varvara.

**ACT 3 SCENE 1** Two weeks later: People shelter from an afternoon storm in the ruins of an abandoned building overlooking the Volga. Kudrjáš exchanges insults with his employer Dikoj. The scientifically minded Kudrjáš recommends the installation of lightning conductors. Dikoj rejects this advice, as storms are a punishment sent by God. Varvara seeks out Kudrjáš as she's worried: Katya is distraught about the imminent return of her husband Tichon. Katya runs on dishevelled, and won't be calmed or comforted. Tichon and Kabanicha now enter. Katya, overwrought by the thunderstorm – which she also sees as punishment from God – confesses her adultery with Boris to the assembled company, and rushes out into the storm.

**ACT 3 SCENE 2:** At twilight Tichon and a servant look in vain for Katya in a deserted place on the bank of the Volga. Kudrjáš and Varvara decide to leave for Moscow. Katya wanders on in a daze, wanting to see Boris once more before she dies. Strange voices call her, but death doesn't come yet. Boris eventually joins her. After a brief farewell he leaves her, as he's been sent to Siberia by Dikoj. Katya, now at peace, finds death in the Volga. Her body is hauled out and presented to Kabanicha, who sardonically thanks the good people for their kindness.

***Katya Kabanova* by Janáček**

With *Katya Kabanova*, Janáček entered a late Indian summer as an operatic composer. He was sympathetic to this Russian narrative, and he associated the title character with Madam Butterfly his favourite operatic heroine. Katya is also linked to the opera's dedicatee: Janáček's own lover Kamila Stösslová. He met her on holiday in a Moravian spa town in 1917, and they embarked on a relationship that lasted until the end of his life. 700 surviving letters confirm that Mrs Stösslová provided the inspiration for characters in all of Janáček's four last successful operas.

The première took place in 1921 at the National Theatre in Brno, the venue where he enjoyed most of his operatic success. As independence took place 15 years after a less successful *Jenůfa* première, the Czechs now had full control of this excellent Germanic opera house. *Katya Kabanova* also set a pattern for Janáček's later operas: all were given first in his native Moravia, then in Prague. *Katya Kabanova* was Janáček's first opera performed in the UK (1948), and for decades it was more frequently performed here than any of his other operas.

*Katya Kabanova* has been described as Janáček's most lyrical opera. Music associated with Katya epitomises this lyricism, and contrasts with Kabanicha's noisy tirades. Katya's monologues provide two highlights. In Act 1 Scene 2 she travels imperceptibly from religious to sexual ecstasy, in a vivid account of her inner life. In Act 3 Scene 2 Katya's inner voices are made audible as an offstage chorus. Kabanicha is Janáček's most evil female portrait. A fate motif is heard softly at the beginning of the overture. This also provides the music for Tichon's departure, the event that precipitates the fateful crisis.

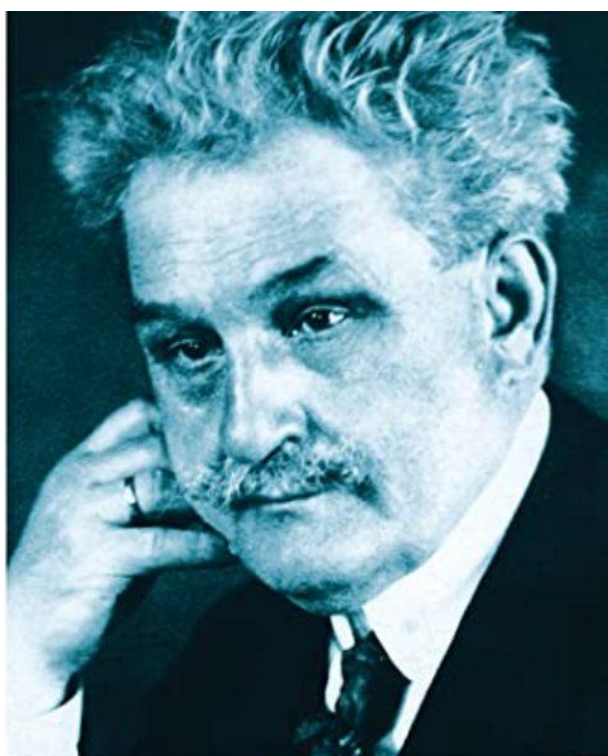
**Leoš Janáček**

Following in a family tradition, Janáček trained as a schoolteacher. The musical portion of his schooling was substantial, and this was augmented by later training at the Prague Organ School, as well as the conservatories of Vienna and Leipzig. A fervent national pride, and a fascination with the greater Slavonic world were formative influences. In 1896 he made a

pivotal trip to Russia. As well as the Russian authors who influenced two of his late operas, he also considered setting Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

PRINCIPAL OPERAS (& COMPOSITION DATES)	LIBRETTI	PREMIÈRES
Jenůfa (1894-1903)	Janáček after a controversial play	Brno 1904
The Excursions of Mr Brouček (1908-20)	Procházka etc after 2 novels by Čech	Prague 1920
Katya Kabanova (1919-21)	Janáček after an Ostrovsky play	Brno 1921
The Cunning Little Vixen (1922-24)	Janáček after an illustrated novel	Brno 1924
The Makropulos Affair (1923-25)	Janáček adapted from a comedy	Brno 1926
From the House of the Dead (1927-28)	Janáček after a Dostoevsky novel	Brno 1930

Janáček's contact with opera was minimal until late in life, and it's likely that the first operas he saw were in Leipzig in 1880. He returned home that year, married, and taught in Brno, notably at the Organ School that he founded. Janáček retired from all other teaching commitments in 1904 to focus on composition.



He paid more attention to opera from 1884 after a tiny permanent theatre was opened in Brno to stage plays and operas in Czech. Janáček's preoccupation with Moravian folk music – with its distinctive modes and rhythms – enriched his musical language. The result was a highly characteristic musical idiom, fresh and appealing, and accessible to a wide spectrum of listeners.

More than 12 years after the modest Brno première of *Jenůfa*, the composer was already 61 years old when its first Prague performance brought him unexpected fame, as well as publication by UNIVERSAL EDITION in Vienna. In 1919 he embarked on an astonishingly fertile last decade, which saw the composition of substantial works such as *Sinfonietta* and the *Glagolitic Mass*, as well as four major operas.

Janáček's gifts as a musical dramatist are a key element of his operatic success. The subject matter of his mature works is very unusual and exceptionally diverse, but they all succeed as effective stage pieces. Binding them together is their succinctness; the composer's uncanny ability to suggest and change a mood with just a few notes; his terse but passionate lyricism; a compassionate humanity; and one of the most powerful emotional charges in the 20th century.

### Operas with Czech (and Bohemian) Connections

<b>Mozart</b>	Premièred in Prague: Don Giovanni (1787), La Clemenza di Tito (1791)
<b>Smetana</b>	Nine operas including: The Brandenburgers in Bohemia (1866), The Bartered Bride (1866), The Kiss (1876)
<b>Dvořák</b>	Ten operas including: Rusalka (1901)
<b>Janáček</b>	Nine operas including – <i>six itemised above</i> – plus Osud/Fate (premièred 1934)
<b>Martinů</b>	Five operas including: The Greek Passion (premièred 1961)

Bohemian is an adjective that's acquired various meanings that can be linked to different operas:

*Somebody from Bohemia (nowadays the western half of the Czech Republic)*

Smetana's **BRANDENBURGERS**, a Bohemian opera set in 1279.

Balfe's **BOHEMIAN GIRL** (1843) comes intriguingly close, as it's set near Bratislava (now in Slovakia). As a minimum this seems more geographically convincing than *THE WINTER'S TALE* by Shakespeare, with its Bohemian coastline! This play is the source of two little-known operas.

*In the 19th century the French started describing gypsies as bohémien, believing they had arrived from Bohemia.*

Balfe's **BOHEMIAN GIRL** (1843) certainly meets this definition, as the heroine is one of several characters with a gypsy heritage.

**CARMEN** (1875) is opera's best known gypsy, and her famous habanera includes "L'amour est enfant de bohème" in its refrain.

Azucena in Verdi's **TROVATORE** (1853) is another memorable Spanish gypsy, but without any direct bohemian connotations

*This Gypsy meaning subsequently evolved to characterise individuals who are likely to prioritise creative and less conventional pursuits, rather than material wealth.*

**LA BOHÈME** (1896) with Mimi, who is opera's best known bohemian girl

### **Jenůfa and Katya Kabanova**

Although Janáček's subject matter is unusually diverse – and two intervening operas and sixteen years separate these two pieces – there are still some interesting similarities between *Jenůfa* and *Katya Kabanova*. Both plots are characteristically Slavonic, with heroines who succumb to sexual temptation. Katya's mother-in-law Kabanicha is more unrelentingly awful than the Kostelnička, who is Jenůfa's pious stepmother. The female sacristan misguidedly aims to resolve Jenůfa's predicament, but subsequently regrets her drastic action.

The elements play a comparable role in both operas: Jenůfa's infant daughter is drowned, and Katya commits suicide in the Volga. When the window of the Kostelnička's cottage blows open, she's filled with foreboding. Katya isn't the only character who believes that storms are a punishment sent by God.

### **Selected Musical Biography**

KABANICHA: DAME FELICITY PALMER (born 1944) is an English mezzo-soprano, who sang soprano roles until 1983. She performed a wide range of parts for many companies from 1971. After making her debut with ENO in 1975, her performance with the company forty years later – as the Countess in *The Queen of Spades* – was described as mesmerising and astonishing. Palmer is a professor at the Royal College of Music in London.

CONDUCTOR: Sir Andrew Davis (1944-2024) was an English conductor who held opera appointments for more than 30 years, starting at Glyndebourne and concluding in Chicago. He also held orchestral appointments in Toronto, Melbourne and with the BBC (twice giving a *Last Night of the Proms* speech that included a G&S patter song). His wide conducting repertoire included a focus on British composers – including Britten – and also on 20th century music.