

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Suite from *The Cunning Little Vixen*

Leoš Janáček

The seventh of the nine operas composed by Leoš Janáček began as a stack of about 200 drawings, made by the artist Stanislav Lolek in the 1890s, that depicted forest creatures, domestic animals, and the people who interact with them. More than two decades later, the editor-in-chief of *Lidové noviny* (*The People's Paper*), a Czech newspaper committed to cheerful and optimistic content, acquired the portfolio of Lolek's drawings and tried to convince anyone among his employees to write some copy that would bind the images into a narrative. Finding no takers, he dumped the file on the desk of Rudolf Těsnohlídek, an editor who happened to be absent that day. On his return, Těsnohlídek tried valiantly to wriggle out of the assignment, to no avail. He grudgingly set to work in February 1920, and that April, May, and June the newspaper published the results in serial form, as what might be called a graphic novella in 51 installments.

Přítody lišky Bystroušky (*The Adventures of Vixen Sharp-ears*) proved immensely popular. Janáček was introduced to it when he overheard his housekeeper, Marie Stejskalová, chortling over an episode in which the vixen carries a flower while being courted by a male fox. She later recounted:

I handed him the newspaper, he looked at the picture, read to himself, and began to smile, and I said to him, "Sir you know so well what animals say, you're always writing down those bird calls — wouldn't it make a marvelous opera!" He said nothing. But he began collecting every installment of *Bystrouška*.

Other operatic projects absorbed Janáček for a while — completing *Katka Kabanová*, preparing for the premiere of *The Excursions of Mr. Brouček*

— but by the middle of 1921 he told *Lidové noviny* that he was collecting "suitable companions for Vixen Bystrouška." At the beginning of 1922, he set to work composing what he described as "a merry thing with a sad end," using a libretto he himself adapted liberally from Těsnohlídek's series. (The 68-year-old composer added, "I am taking a place at that sad end myself.") The score was largely complete by October, with revisions extending through March 1924, and it was premiered November 6, 1924, at the Brno National Theatre. Janáček pointed out in his 1924 autobiography:

Each of my operas has grown for a year or two in my thoughts without my hindering its growth by a single note. For a long time I had a real headache with every work. I just played with *Liška Bystrouška* as if she were tame. It's strange how the rusty red of her fur continually blazed in my eyes.

IN SHORT

Born: July 3, 1854, in Hukvaldy, near Příbor, Moravia (today the Czech Republic)

Died: August 12, 1928, in Moravská Ostrava, Czechoslovakia (today the Czech Republic)

Work composed: 1922–24; arranged by Charles Mackerras, completed in 2010

World premiere: November 6, 1924, at the Brno National Theatre in Moravia

New York Philharmonic premiere: *The Cunning Little Vixen*, complete opera, premiered June 22–25, 2011, Alan Gilbert, conductor; these performances mark the premiere of the suite arranged by Charles Mackerras.

Estimated duration: ca. 22 minutes

In Těsnohládek's serial novella, the vixen Bystrouška is brought home by a forester who raises her with his dachshund (which she befriends) and his hens (which she devours). She escapes to the forest, returns periodically to the forester's farm on hunting forays, and eventually meets a gentleman fox, with whom she starts a family. Janáček restructured this narrative considerably. His most colossal change was the fate of the vixen. She had been living happily when the newspaper serial ended, but in the opera she dies, shot by a poacher. This is a shocking moment, and yet it does not necessarily come across as the climactic point of the drama. It is merely a moment in the ongoing cycle of life. The opera continues through two further scenes. In the first, the forester grouches to his friend the schoolmaster about growing old, and they reminisce about their friend the priest, who has been transferred to a different parish and has written that he is lonely. In the final scene, the forester, now alone, waxes nostalgic. "Is it a fairy tale or is it true?" he wonders, marveling at the beauty of the world that surrounds him. Dozing off, he dreams about — or perhaps actually sees — one of Bystrouška's cubs, and his gun drops to the ground as nature continues its everlasting cycle around him.

About the Arrangement

Among the most devoted champions of Janáček's operas was the Australian conductor Charles Mackerras (1925–2010) — Sir Charles beginning in 1979, a year after he received the Janáček Medal for his services to Czech music. In 1937 his teacher Václav Talich had conducted a Prague production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* that used a lush re-orchestration of Janáček's music. Mackerras used that orchestration when he first crafted an orchestral suite from the opera, feeling it suited a symphonic piece that would need to stand on its own without voices. When a later generation came to prefer the composer's distinctive soundworld, Mackerras revised his *Cunning Little Vixen Suite* into the version played here, which restores Janáček's original orchestration.

Instrumentation: four flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, snare drum, bass drum, celeste, harp, and strings.

The Suite Story

The music in the Suite from *The Cunning Little Vixen* comes from Act I of the opera. It includes the portions scored for orchestra alone as well as an orchestral reduction of the act's concluding scene. The first movement of the suite is a tone poem depicting a glittering natural world: buzzing flies and dragonflies, a pipe-smoking badger, a dancing cricket and grasshopper, a frog failing to catch a mosquito, and finally, the forester capturing the vixen. The suite's second movement (which follows the first without a break) begins with music from the opera's second scene, a depiction of the forester's barnyard. It skips from there to an orchestral interlude in which the sleeping vixen dreams of sexual awakening, and then to a scene where she tries to inspire the hens to feminist consciousness-raising and, failing in her attempts, settles for eating them instead — after which she escapes to the forest.



A scene from the New York Philharmonic's 2011 staged production of *The Cunning Little Vixen*, with Isabel Bayrakdarian in the title role