

Cunning Little Vixen, The [Přihody Lišky Bystroušky ('The Adventures of the Vixen Bystrouška')]

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Opera in three acts by Leoš Janáček to his own libretto after Rudolf Těsnohlídek's novel *Liška Bystrouška*; Brno, National Theatre, 6 November 1924.

Těsnohlídek's novel came about as a text which the Brno newspaper *Lidové noviny* commissioned to go with a collection of drawings made many years earlier by the painter Stanislav Lolek (fig.1). These told the story of a clever vixen reared as a cub by a forester but who escapes and raises a family. Těsnohlídek's *Liška Bystrouška* was serialized in *Lidové noviny* between 7 April and 23 June 1920, though it was not until 1921 (when the novel was published in book form) that Janáček began to consider making an opera out of it. He began work on 22 January 1922 and after completing an early draft of Act 1 (26 March 1922) he contacted Těsnohlídek for his permission and got him to write the text for the Forester's song in Act 2. Janáček made his own libretto: Acts 1 and 2 correspond roughly to the novel; Act 3 is a free amalgam of passages from the novel and other elements. Janáček completed the opera on 10 October 1923 and Universal Edition published a vocal score (made by Janáček's pupil Břetislav Bakala) in July 1924, some months ahead of the Brno première on 6 November under František Neumann. The Prague première followed on 18 May 1925 under Ostrčil. Max Brod's German version took considerable liberties in attempting to clarify and unify the plot, with a much more tangible relationship between the Vixen and Terynka, a young girl talked about by the humans but never seen. The German première (Mainz, 13 February 1927) was not particularly successful and the opera had to wait until Felsenstein's celebrated production at the Komische Oper in Berlin in 1956 to enjoy international acclaim (for illustration see Rudolf Heinrich).

Bystrouška ('Little Sharp Ears') [The Vixen]	soprano
(as a cub)	child soprano
(as a young woman)	dancer
Fox [<i>Zlatohřbátek</i> , 'Golden-back']	soprano
Forester	baritone
Schoolmaster	tenor
Mosquito	tenor
Badger	bass

Priest	bass
Blue dragonfly	dancer
Cricket	child soprano
Grasshopper	child soprano
Frog	child soprano
Forester's Wife	contralto
Owl	contralto
Lapák <i>the dog</i>	mezzo-soprano
Frantík <i>a boy</i>	soprano
Pepík	soprano
Cock	soprano
Jay	soprano
Chocholka <i>the hen</i>	soprano
Pásek <i>an innkeeper</i>	baritone
Woodpecker	contralto
Harašta <i>a poultry dealer and poacher</i>	baritone
Mrs Pásková	soprano
Hens, creatures of the forest, offstage chorus, fox cubs (children)	
Ballet: midges, squirrels, hedgehog	

Setting A forest near Brno, a farmyard at the Forester's lodge and Pásek's inn; about 1920

Synopsis

Act 1

A wooded glen, a sunny summer afternoon During the orchestral prelude the Badger emerges from his sets, smoking a pipe. Flies swirl round and dance, followed by the Blue Dragonfly. They disperse as the Forester approaches. Tired from the heat he lies down and dozes off. The Cricket and Grasshopper make music (a delicately-scored waltz) and are joined by the tipsy Mosquito. The Frog tries to catch the Mosquito but has himself attracted the attention of the young Vixen, in his efforts to escape her, he lands on the Forester's nose. The Forester wakes up, seizes the Vixen and takes her home 'for the children'. The music of the opening prelude returns as the Blue Dragonfly searches vainly for the Vixen.

The yard of the Forester's lodge; autumn, in afternoon sun After a short prelude the Vixen and Lapák the dog discuss their lack of experience in love. When Lapák makes advances to the Vixen she knocks him over. Pepík and Frantík run out and torment the Vixen. She attacks Pepík and attempts to escape but is tied up by the Forester. In a substantial interlude, night falls and the Vixen dreams she is a young girl. The dawn breaks; whole-tone harmonies give way to a radiant B \flat major and a soaring new theme.

Lapák and the Cock advise the Vixen to submit to captivity, while the Hens (a two-part chorus) industriously lay eggs. The Vixen rebukes the Hens for their slavish devotion to the Cock and in disgust at their reactionary attitudes feigns suicide. Intrigued, the Cock approaches, is seized by the Vixen and is killed. In the commotion which follows (an energetic finale) the Forester tries to beat the Vixen but she bites through her leash and escapes into the woods.

Act 2

The Badger's sett in the wood, late afternoon The music of the prelude provides material for the subsequent scene in which the Vixen disturbs the Badger and then mockingly criticizes him, encouraged by the chorus of forest animals. Physically beaten by the enraged Badger, the Vixen retaliates by fouling his sett. This forces the Badger to leave and the Vixen promptly occupies it. An interlude leads into the next scene.

A room inside the inn 'U Pásků' ['At the Páseks'] The Schoolmaster and Forester are playing cards. The Priest joins them as the Forester, teasing the Schoolmaster about rumours of his impending marriage, sings a song about Veronika, a woman loved and lost, 'Bývalo' ('It used to be'). To get his own back the Schoolmaster taunts the Forester with the Vixen's escape. Hearing the cock crow, the Schoolmaster and then the Priest leave. The Forester reflects drily on the Schoolmaster's infatuation but leaves abruptly when Pásek reminds him of the Vixen's escape. An interlude leads into a scene in the forest.

The forest, a path leading uphill with sunflowers growing against the fence; a moonlit night The Schoolmaster drunkenly makes his way home, regretting his unsteady gait. The Vixen, who has watched his antics, hides behind a sunflower which the Schoolmaster mistakes for Terynka, the young woman he admires from afar. He declares his love for her and, in attempting to embrace the sunflower, falls over the fence. The Vixen escapes and now observes the approaching Priest. He remembers bitterly his deception by a young girl

when he was a student. The Forester is heard searching for the Vixen. She runs off, the Schoolmaster and Priest take fright (singing together briefly) and make their separate ways home as two shots ring out. The Forester comes out from the trees, convinced that he saw the Vixen.

The Vixen's burrow in the moonlight A gentle vocalise for offstage chorus opens the scene. The Vixen approvingly observes the Fox, who approaches and strikes up a conversation. The Vixen boasts of her home and her past exploits at the Forester's (a set-piece narrative condensing many chapters of the novel and establishing her fearless and assertive personality). Impressed, the Fox introduces himself and then dashes off while the Vixen, in a lyrical interlude, muses on her 'beauty'. The Fox returns with a freshly killed rabbit, which they share. In further conversation they admit to each other their sexual inexperience. When the Fox makes advances the Vixen at first rejects them but this prompts him to a passionate declaration of his love. She is won over: her 'Chcu!' ('I want!') is heard over languorously sensuous music and they go into her burrow. Time passes (a repeat of the Blue Dragonfly music from Act 1) and the Owl and the Jay comment censoriously on the turn of events. Soon the Vixen comes out again crying; she whispers something to the Fox and he decides they must be married at once. The opening offstage chorus now designated ('the voice of the forest') returns to provide a background to the ceremony celebrated by a Woodpecker. Then the chorus music accelerates into an exuberant and substantial dance to close the act.

Act 3

A clearing in the forest; autumn, noon, a clear sky An assertive, mostly minor-key, prelude announces the approach of Harašta, who sings a three stanza song 'Děž sem vandroval' ('When I went a wandering'). He notices a dead hare on the path but is surprised by the Forester, whom he tells of his impending marriage to Terynka. The Forester warns him about poaching and examines the dead hare. He notices a fox trail and, convinced that it is the Vixen's, sets a trap for her. The Forester and Harašta leave the clearing separately.

Immediately the Fox Cubs run on. Their song - a two-stanza folk-text 'Běží liška k Táboru' ('A vixen runs to Tábor'), in a delightful Lydian setting- develops into a suspicious investigation of the baited hare. With the help of the Vixen and the Fox they contemptuously recognize it as a trap. Surrounded by their many children, the Vixen and Fox look forward to breeding again in May. Over their lyrical duet the voice of Harašta is heard again singing another folk-text, 'Když jsem já šel okolo' ('When I went round the green grove'). He enters with a pannier full of poultry. The Vixen lies down in his path and feigns injury. Harašta reaches for his gun but the Vixen lures him away until he stumbles, and bloodies his nose. Meanwhile the Vixen and her family devour the contents of the pannier. Angered, Harašta fires wildly, the foxes scatter but the Vixen lies dying.

A bowling alley in the garden at 'U Pásků; un accustomed quiet The prelude develops into a nostalgic Adagio (marked both 'espressivo' and 'dolcissimo'). Time has passed. Only the Forester and the Schoolmaster are left at Pásek's inn. The Forester teases the Schoolmaster about his encounter with the sunflower, but is immediately sympathetic when he sees his friend grieving over Terynka's wedding. The Priest has moved to a new parish and has written that he is lonely (the nostalgic music of the prelude flowers into a new

variant). The Forester complains of getting old like his dog, Lapák. He leaves, and a brief interlude follows based on the new nostalgic variant. Soon it gives way to vigorous music chiefly for horn quartet (a post-première addition to help with the scene change).

A wooded glen as in the opening scene, the sun shining after a shower The Forester is walking home. He notices a fungus growing and is reminded of happily picking mushrooms with his wife on their honeymoon. He contemplates the scene in one of the most lyrical outpourings of Janáček's late operas, 'Je to pohádka či Pravda?' ('Is it a fairy-tale or true?'), expressing his love for the sunlit evenings in the forest and imagining the seasonal return of the fairy spirits and the unearthly joy which they bring to mankind. He falls asleep and the animals from the opening scene return. In his dream the Forester sees a vixen-cub, looking exactly like the Vixen Bystrouska herself. As he reaches out towards her he catches hold of a frog instead - the grandson (it explains) of the one which landed on his face in Act 1. In silent reverie the Forester lets his gun slip to the ground.

Janáček wrote *The Vixen* on the eve of his 70th birthday and in this, his sunniest work, he came to terms with his years and his inevitable death. Thus he boldly introduced the death of the Vixen into the opera, but without fuss or pathos, and ended the opera with an evocation of its beginning and a strong message of renewal into which death is subsumed. The images emphasized in his libretto and in his music are cyclical; the seasons come and go, and though the humans get older, they are juxtaposed against images of youth. The children's voices that Janáček carefully specified help to underline this point. Their enlargement of the vocal spectrum, together with the inventive use of mime and ballet, also serves to portray the animal world.