

From the House of the Dead [*Z mrtvého domu*].

Opera in three acts by [leoš Janáček](#) to his own libretto after [fyodor mikhaylovich Dostoyevsky](#)'s novel *Zapiski iz myortvogo doma* ('Memoirs from the House of the Dead'); Brno, National Theatre, 12 April 1930 (in Osvald Chlubna and Břetislav Bakala's arrangement).

Alexandr Petrovič Gorjančikov	baritone
Aljeja <i>a young Tartar</i>	mezzo-soprano
Luka Kuzmič (Filka Morozov)	tenor
Skuratov	tenor
Šiškov	tenor
Prison Governor	baritone
Big Prisoner/Nikita	tenor
Small Prisoner	baritone
First Guard	tenor
Second Guard	baritone
Elderly Prisoner	tenor
Voice (<i>offstage</i>)	tenor
Cook (<i>a prisoner</i>)	baritone
Priest	baritone
Čekunov	bass
Drunk Prisoner	tenor
Šapkin	tenor
Blacksmith (<i>a prisoner</i>)	baritone
Prisoner/Kedril	tenor
Prisoner/Don Juan/The Brahmin	bass
Young Prisoner	tenor
Prostitute	mezzo-soprano
Čerevin	tenor
Male chorus: prisoner (taking silent parts in the Act 2 plays); guests, prison guards (silent)	
<i>Setting</i> A Russian prison on the River Irtysh, about 1860	

Janáček began sketching his final opera in February 1927. He worked directly from his Russian edition of Dostoyevsky's novel, translating into Czech as he went along. He used no libretto, simply brief notes with lists of characters, incidents and page numbers. A first version was complete by 16 or 17 October 1927, a second by 4 January 1928. From March until 20 June 1928, he worked closely with his two copyists (Václav Sedláček and Jaroslav Kulhánek), who together made a fair copy of his autograph which incorporated many changes. By the end of July 1928 Janáček had checked through Acts 1 and 2; Act 3 was on his desk when he died. Apart from any further corrections, doublings and adjustments to the orchestration that Janáček might have made at rehearsals, there is no reason to consider the opera as anything but complete. However, its sometimes chamber-like orchestration persuaded Janáček's pupils Břetislav Bakala and Osvald Chlubna to revise the opera before its first performance in Brno

in 1930. Their work consisted mostly of filling out the orchestration and adding an ‘optimistic’ ending (an apotheosis of the freedom chorus) to replace Janáček’s grim march. The later history of the opera has consisted largely of shedding these accretions. In 1961 Kubelík conducted a version in Munich based mostly on Janáček’s original autograph; in 1964 Universal Edition added the original ending as an appendix to their vocal score; and in 1980 Decca released a recording by Charles Mackerras, prepared by Charles Mackerras and John Tyrrell on the basis of the copyists’ score.

The overture was originally conceived as a violin concerto titled in successive versions ‘Duše’ (‘Soul’) and ‘Putování dušičky’ (‘The Wandering of a Little Soul’) and first performed in a realization by Miloš Stědroň and Leoš Faltus in 1988. Its affinity with the opera is suggested by the inclusion of ‘chains’ in its instrumentation. Janáček’s final revision placed it firmly as the separate ‘úvod’ (‘introduction’) to the opera, and some of its musical material, for instance the opening motif ([ex.1](#)), is employed in the opera. Nevertheless the many passages for solo violin betray its origins. In form it is a rondo; its final *maestoso* episode is a heroic fanfare which suggests the optimistic dimension of Janáček’s motto for the opera, ‘In every creature a spark of God’.

Ex.1 Moderato

fl, vn solo
fp
hn
vc, db, dbn

ex.1

Act 1 *A courtyard in a Siberian prison; early morning* The opening motif of the opera ([ex.2](#)), with its painful dissonances, is a motto theme that runs through the whole of this act. Prisoners come in from the barracks and wash and argue. They talk of a new prisoner, a gentleman (Alexandr Petrovič Gorjančikov), whose arrival soon follows. His fear and vulnerability is suggested by a high solo violin, heard above [ex.2](#). The Prison Governor interrogates him and on learning that he is a ‘political prisoner’ orders him to be flogged. Soon [ex.2](#) combines with a new motif and cries of pain off stage.

Ex.2 Moderato

fl, ob
vn (trem.)
cl
hn
bn, vc

ex.2

This music merges into the next episode. The Big Prisoner brings out a captured eagle; the prisoners torment it but admire its defiance in captivity, proclaiming it an ‘orel lesů’ (‘eagle of the forests’). Suddenly the Governor returns with his guards and orders the prisoners off to work. Half of them depart to outdoor work, singing a ‘mournful song’ to words quoted by

Dostoyevsky, 'Neuvidí oko již' ('My eye will never again see the land of my birth'), punctuated by [ex.2](#).

Skuratov is among those who remain. He sings snatches of a 'Cheerful song' (words from Dostoyevsky) and annoys Luka, who picks a quarrel with him. Skuratov recalls his life in Moscow and his previous trade as a cobbler. He breaks into a wild dance, then collapses (a harsh version of [ex.2](#)).

Luka, as he sews, recalls his previous imprisonment for vagrancy. He tells how he incited the other prisoners to rebellion and how he killed the officer who came to quell the disturbance. This is a substantial monologue which grows in intensity to the point where Luka describes plunging his knife into the officer (a *fortissimo* version of [ex.2](#)). Then follows a dreamy version on two solo violins of the opening motif from the overture. A march-like variant of this theme builds up to an exciting climax, again dominated by [ex.2](#), as Luka describes how he was flogged. Tension is dissolved by a naive question from the Elderly Prisoner. Alexandr Petrovič, who has meanwhile been punished in a similar way, is brought back by the guards, half dead. The long orchestral postlude is built up by a hypnotic peroration on the theme from Skuratov and Luka's quarrel, silenced by a *fortissimo* timpani solo.

Act 2 The bank of the river Irtysh with a view of the steppe; a year after Act 1, towards sunset The prelude, with an offstage vocalise, evokes the openness of the wide steppe – a contrast to the enclosed prison yard of Act 1. From the outdoor activity it is presumably summer: prisoners are working on a ship – the sounds of metal implements and a saw are specified in the instrumentation.

Alexandr Petrovič asks the Tartar boy Aljeja about his family and offers to teach him to read and write, an offer warmly accepted. With the day's work over (the ship's mast is heard falling), the prisoners throw down their tools. Bells sound from afar, then from the settlement. A colourful march accompanies the arrival of the Governor and Guests, and of the Priest, who blesses the food and the river before going off with the Governor. The prisoners sit down to eat. Skuratov, with the occasional interruption from the Drunk Prisoner, tells how he killed the man his sweetheart Luiza was forced to marry. This is the gentlest and most lyrical of the three major narratives of the opera, a rondo based on a charming, modally inflected motif. Its end is overwhelmed by the prisoners' excitement at the thought of the 'theatre'.

On an improvised stage the prisoners perform two plays, mostly in mime: 'Kedril [i.e. Leporello] and Don Juan' (who is taken off by devils at the end) and 'The Miller's Beautiful Wife', based on Gogol's tale of a wife hiding various lovers around the room while her husband is absent. The last lover is a 'Brahmin' who turns out to be Don Juan in disguise and who dances off with the Miller's Wife before being consumed by flames.

It grows dark. The Young Prisoner goes off with a Prostitute. A mood of quiet contentment is evoked by offstage folksongs (Luke and chorus). While Alexandr Petrovič and Aljeja are drinking tea the belligerent Small Prisoner, resenting Alexandr Petrovič's 'gentleman-like behaviour', picks a quarrel. He breaks a jug over Aljeja, who falls to the ground. Guards rush in to keep order: the act dies on a sustained side drum roll.

Act 3.i The prison hospital, towards evening The gentle prelude ends with a triumphant theme in C major. Aljeja, delirious with fever, is watched over by Alexandr Petrovič. Čekunov waits on both of them to the rage of Luka, dying on an adjacent bed. Šapkin

describes how a police officer interrogated him and almost pulled his ears off. Skuratov, now mad, cries for Luiza.

Night falls, suggested by chamber textures and duet-like writing in the orchestra as the prisoners fall asleep. The silence is broken by the Elderly Prisoner's lament that he will never see his children again. Egged on by Čerevin, Šiškov tells the story of Akulka (Akulina), Filka Morozov's sweetheart. Filka refused to marry her, declaring that he had already slept with her. Šiškov has to marry her instead. On his wedding night he beats her and then discovers she is pure. He attempts to take revenge on Filka, who alleges that Šiškov was too drunk to notice her state. Šiškov beats her again, and discovering that she still loves Filka, kills her. This brutal tale, Janáček's longest monologue, is sustained by the virtuoso vignettes (usually in direct speech) of its many characters, and by the tension between the wrongs done to Akulka and the music of utmost tenderness with which she is depicted. It is punctuated both by Čerevin's questions and by the strange choral sighs of the sleeping prisoners. Luka dies as the story ends. An irony added by Janáček is that only now does Šiškov recognize Luka as Filka. Šiškov is almost speechless with rage, but the comment of the Elderly Prisoner that a mother gave birth even to Filka is more true to the humanitarian message of the opera. A Guard calls for Alexandr Petrovič. An automaton-like march leads to scene ii.

3.ii *As Act I* The Governor, drunk, apologizes to Alexandr Petrovič before the other prisoners and tells him that he is to be released. To a warm-sounding version of [ex.2](#) Alexandr Petrovič's chains are knocked off and he bids farewell to Aljeja, who has run in from the hospital. As Alexandr Petrovič leaves the prisoners release the eagle and celebrate its freedom in a brief chorus; it flies away to the triumphant theme from the prelude to the act. The guards order the prisoners off to work. The automaton scene-change march ends the opera.

This is Janáček's most extraordinary and arguably his greatest opera. There is virtually no plot (the arrival and departure of Alexandr Petrovič provides its slender narrative frame), and except for the tiny part of the Prostitute and the trouser role of Aljeja, there are no women in this opera. There are also no main characters: instead it is a 'collective' opera in which soloists emerge from the chorus and then blend back into anonymity. For all this it is a compelling stage work, the most powerfully charged of all Janáček's operas, and yet the most tender and compassionate.

For a page from the autograph score, *see* [not available online]

John Tyrrell