

Leoš Janáček: The Centenary of Academic Recognition

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Abstract: The year 2025 marks the centenary of a momentous event in the academic and musical life of the Czech Republic: the awarding of the degree of *Doctor honoris causa* by Masaryk University in Brno to eminent composer and thinker Leoš Janáček. Following a list of other musicians who have received this esteemed academic honor, the article discusses Janáček's background and achievements, recounts the conferment ceremony, and provides a succinct analysis of the speeches made during the occasion. The events for the centenary celebration, which were held in Brno in the fall of 2024 and the winter of 2025, are mentioned in the article's conclusion.

Key-words: *doctorate, confluence, people, philosophy, speech*

1. Introduction

In recognition of their contributions to the advancement and enrichment of humankind's cultural legacy, European academic institutions have awarded renowned composers the honorary degree of *Doctor honoris causa* since the seventeenth century. Presented in chronological order, the following are a few distinguished names:

- Joseph Haydn, University of Oxford, 1791 (Sadie and Tyrrell 2001, 185);
- Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, University of Leipzig, 1836 (Todd 2003, 315);
- Antonín Dvořák, Charles University in Prague, and University of Cambridge, 1891 (Dunnett 1995, 38);
- Edvard Grieg, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Max Bruch, Arrigo Boito, and Camille Saint-Saëns, University of Cambridge, 1893 (Clericetti 2016, 135);
- Camille Saint-Saëns, University of Oxford, 1907 (Clericetti 2016, 160).

On January 28, 1919, mere months after the proclamation of Czechoslovakia's independence, the newly convened National Assembly resolved to establish a

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Czechoslovak university in Brno. It was to encompass four faculties: Law, Medicine, Natural Sciences, and Arts, and to be named «Masaryk» in tribute to Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the inaugural president of the nascent state of Czechoslovakia. (MU Establishing Act n.d.). A Czech philosopher and statesman, fervently committed to creating an independent state uniting the Czech and Slovak peoples, he exhibited a pronounced receptivity to cultural development. (Pánek and Tůma 2018, 420). The university officially commenced its activities on November 22, 1919, and within five years, its authorities resolved that the time had come to bestow the inaugural *Doctor honoris causa* distinction. The inaugural conferral of this distinguished honor upon a native Moravian was both appropriate and emblematic, reflecting the enduring intensity of patriotic sentiment following liberation from Habsburg sovereignty (Zahrádka, Leoš Janáček byl prvním čestným doktorem Masarykovy univerzity 2025).

2. The Origins of Leoš Janáček and his Accomplishments Prior to 1925

Janáček was born on July 3, 1854, in the village of Hukvaldy in Moravia, situated near the present-day borders of the Czech Republic with Poland and Slovakia. The contemporary Moravia-Silesia region was, for centuries, under Austrian dominion and consequently situated at the intersection of the Slavic and Germanic cultural spheres. The composer's native region exhibits a distinctive characteristic: in addition to Czechs, Poles, and Slovaks, Slavic populations established there since the early Middle Ages, a Vlach community of Carpathian origin from northern Romania penetrated this territory in the seventeenth century. (Ivanciu 2013). The Moravian Vlachs, settled in the Czech lands since then, are of Latin origin and inhabit the so-called *Moravské Valašsko* (*Moravian Wallachia*) (Koštálková 2022), part of the neighboring Zlín region.

This multinational heritage inevitably exerted a formative influence on the future musician, an ardent collector of folklore, which he systematically edited and published (Folk-music editions n.d.). Several of his works, notably the *tance*, including *Valašské tance*, op. 2, draw directly from folk traditions (Orchestral n.d.), with the title explicitly alluding to the musical heritage of Moravian Vlachs.

By the time he reached seventy in July 1924, Leoš Janáček's compositional oeuvre had extended well beyond the confines of Czechoslovakia, with his operatic works receiving critical acclaim and enthusiastic reception across numerous European cultural centers. The conclusion of that year witnessed the North American premiere of the opera that had already established the composer's international

stature: on December 6, 1924, *Jenůfa* was presented at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Furthermore, Janáček's compositional output spanned a diverse array of genres, including instrumental, chamber, and orchestral music, alongside both secular and sacred vocal works, which had begun to attract considerable recognition and esteem from both audiences and critics.

As previously observed, Janáček's profound attachment to his homeland impelled him to engage in a rigorous study of the region's folklore and publish seminal collections of folk melodies; furthermore, it served as a primary impetus for the composition of works intimately rooted in folk tradition. In Janáček's work, the act of folk collecting evolved over time into a far more sophisticated enterprise, characterized by his acute observational acuity and methodical investigation of the sonic environment. For many years, he carefully recorded the everyday language spoken by people as well as the nonverbal communication of animals and plants.

Complementing these endeavours was Janáček's literary vocation, manifested in a substantial corpus of chronicles, studies, and musical essays, alongside feuilletons on contemporary life, predominantly published in Brno's press, especially *Lidové noviny*.

3. Academic Solemnity: Foundations and Proceedings

As previously noted, 1924 commemorated the seventieth birthday of Leoš Janáček, the preeminent Moravian luminary, who was universally esteemed and internationally recognized. Gregor Johann Mendel, an Augustinian friar and pioneering biologist and botanist, stands as another towering intellectual figure of Brno, universally acclaimed as the founder of modern genetics. (Daintith and Gjertsen 1999, 371). Born in 1822 and deceased by 1884, Mendel could no longer be honored; thus, in the autumn of 1924, Brno's university laurels were conferred upon Janáček. Accordingly, in a letter dated January 3, 1925, Arne Novák, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Masaryk University, informed the composer of the decision to confer upon him the degree of *Doctor honoris causa*, an act that had been formally approved just days earlier by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education. A prominent literary critic and professor based in Brno, Arne Novák (Encyclopedia History Brno; prof. PhDr. Arne Novák n.d.) authored the customary *Laudatio* and, a decade after the composer's death, dedicated an extensive study to his literary endeavours (A. Novák 1938).

The inaugural conferral of the *Doctor honoris causa* degree by Masaryk University unfolded on Wednesday, January 28, 1925, in a ceremony of pronounced

academic solemnity, aptly coinciding with the sixth anniversary of the university's founding. «It was a great celebration, opening with the sounding of a fanfare performed by the students of the conservatory. During the ceremonial act, the Maestro's choruses were performed by the male choir Foerster». (Zahrádka, The Hundredth Anniversary of the Conferral of an Honorary Doctorate on Leoš Janáček by Masaryk University 2024). Under the presidency of Antonín Beer (Encyclopedia History Brno; prof. PhDr. Antonín Beer n.d.), the solemnity comprised two addresses: the *Laudatio*, delivered by Arne Novák, and *Spondeo ac Polliceor!*, the composer's own valedictory oration in acknowledgment of the distinction conferred on him.

4. Solemn Addresses

4.1. Arne Novák, *Laudatio*

Prior to 1919, Brno lacked a fully-fledged institution of higher learning, hosting only advanced pedagogical and technical schools, rendering the event unprecedented in the city's academic history. Accordingly, the *Laudatio* assumed an even more exceptional significance. Selected excerpts from Arne Novák's address reveal not only profound esteem for Janáček's intellectual and artistic stature but also the patriotic ethos that permeated his being. «Today, for the first time, Masaryk University in Brno, in accordance with an ancient and venerable academic tradition, confers the honorary degree of *Doctor* to a man who, through both his work and influence, has rendered outstanding service to national culture and, though not a member of the university community, has contributed to what every institution of higher learning upholds as its highest mission. We are honored to bestow this distinguished award upon a personality who, throughout a blessed life, has united artistic passion with deep moral earnestness, a robust and earthy native character with an intellectual level worthy of the global stage, and, perhaps most rare of all, the creative force of a musical master forging new paths in art with the investigative mind of a collector, theorist, and scholar who brings a venerable national tradition to fulfilment. [...] A native of Hukvaldy in Moravia, located at the borderland between the Wallachian and Lachian communities, Leoš Janáček is connected to the soil of his tribe and homeland [...] In him alone a new element enters Czech musical art, Moravian and Eastern [...] It signifies a firm rooting in the soil of the people, a close connection with nature, a determined awareness of connection with Slavdom, but perhaps also that slow growth, late ripening, and ability to endure for a long time [...] Those of us who have devoted our lives to the study and service of the word will

return again and again to those Janáček creations born from a completely new penetration into the melodic essence of the word, its characterizing power, and its dramatic bearing: here stands someone entirely new and personal before us, who in his own way is not only a theorist and researcher but above all a creator [...] Let it be Leoš Janáček who first receives the honorary doctoral degree at this university!». (Novák, Řeči a proslovy 1931, 30-33).

4.2. Leoš Janáček, *Spondeo ac Polliceor!*

The Latin phrase in the title means *I pledge and promise*. Of Roman juridical origin, the phrase conveys solemn commitment and is traditionally used in Czech academic ceremonies. Following Arne Novák, I cite excerpts from Janáček's original oration (Janáček n.d.), supplemented by brief analytical commentary.

Janáček's reply to the *Laudatio* begins with a poised acknowledgment of gratitude toward the organizers for conferring the honor upon a musician. Janáček emphasized that the honor bestowed transcended his individual person, symbolizing a tribute to music itself. Here, the author intersperses a few words of profound significance: «It is known that for scientific aesthetics, working in the field of musical - was tormented! One was a musical masterpiece; Kant was at the level of a cooking product». Janáček's allusion to the German philosopher evidences both erudition and a justified irony. The rationale lies in the Czech composer's dissent from Immanuel Kant's disparaging remarks on music (Kant 1922), found in the chapter *Vergleichung des ästhetischen Werts der schönen Künste untereinander* (*Comparison of the aesthetic value of the fine arts among themselves*) of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*).

What follows is a brief but fervent encomium of music, commencing with rhythm, which the honouree conceives as arising from both human consciousness and expression: «In my work, he praises the exuberance of rhythms. I know that rhythmic figures are as moving as our consciousness is; I know that the time trial is the work of our very knowledge that to explain it, for example, by explaining our consciousness».

After addressing the creative liberty of composers such as Beethoven, Schreker, Schönberg, and Debussy, Leoš Janáček states: «Creating compositional is the same ways of thinking as in everyday life, as in pure scientific work. There are no miracles in art. [...] And even a researcher can't do without „fantasy”. And freedom of thought is freedom in the architecture of the work». It affirms liberation from the constraints of prescriptive rules, mirroring Janáček's youthful rejection of formal studies in Leipzig and Vienna, where he found the imposed restrictions intolerable.

Wagner, Liszt, Berlioz, Mahler, and Strauss are cited as kindred spirits in their commitment to expressive musical language. Then, seemingly abruptly, the Czech musician asserts: «My notated tunes of speech! They are the gateway to the music of the universe». This approach sets him apart, and he regards it as universally valid. One perceives the pride of a man for whom speech is the philosopher's stone and the supreme creative ideal.

Janáček swiftly returns to the concept of time, portraying its fleeting yet infinite nature through metaphors aligned with Wilhelm Wundt's philosophy: «The 1/1000 second time segment is already the scene of tones. We are struck by the sight of a drop of blood squealing with an even dying life. And her painted red? The relativity of expression is a piece of cake for us. No one believes him. And here I meet W. Wundt». Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), German philosopher, psychologist, and physiologist, is recognized as the father of modern psychology and a pioneer in the study of subjective time perception (Audi n.d., 1139). Beyond a deep understanding of Wundt's ideas, Janáček adapted his own conceptions to philosophical currents he considered both valid and significant.

The celebrated musician's speech openly expresses gratitude to his teachers, whose advice he admits neglecting. Notably, the following sentences: «My dear teachers - but I always found myself on the opposite bank before they went. Something inside me was resisting, something was growing that couldn't dodge» were delivered in English.

Sincere and solemn tributes to his parents and their heritage precede the closing passage of the address, titled *Spondeo ac Polliceor*. Janáček conveys respectful salutations and earnest exhortations to the assembled scholarly youth while extolling the young Czechoslovak Republic and its distinguished president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk: «And to his question, what kind of warm contribution the Czech nation made to the development of – music, I answer: we spread music to all the sound of the universe - tone gets deep roots - goes back to the depths where thoughts – glow in addition to reveling in a beautiful tone, the philosophy of tone also takes hold. May our republic flourish, long live its president dr. T. G. Masaryk».

5. The Centenary Commemoration in Brno

Masaryk University and Brno's musical community commemorated the centenary of Leoš Janáček's *Doctor honoris causa* with a series of events. The commemorative events commenced with a thematic exhibition, *Jako Janáček sem jel, jako doktor se vracím* (*I came here as Janáček, I return as a doctor*), which was inaugurated on

November 12, 2024, in the reading room of the Faculty of Philosophy. Conceptual artist Vendula Chalánková curated a collection of exhibits arranged in two rooms: one dedicated to documents illustrating the centennial ceremony, the other showcasing «a pexeso with a theme by Leoš Janáček, but also with T-shirts, chocolates, lollipops or children's coloring books» (<https://www.em.muni.cz/> n.d.).

A celebratory concert followed on November 23, 2024, in the Faculty of Philosophy's assembly hall, featuring the Moravian Teachers' Society Choir, established in 1903, which performed a selection of Janáček's compositions for male choruses. The evening included succinct orations by Professor Miloš Štědroň and composer-conductor, Petr Kotík.

Finally, on January 27, 2025, Jiří Zahrádka, a leading figure in the scholarship on Leoš Janáček's life, work, and legacy, delivered a lecture within the thematic exhibition hosted in the reading room of the Faculty of Philosophy in Brno, Czech Republic. (Zahrádka, Leoš Janáček byl prvním čestným doktorem Masarykovy univerzity 2025).

6. Conclusions

In January 1925, when Masaryk University awarded Leoš Janáček its highest academic honor, it was unforeseen that the composer would live only three more years, nor how profoundly he would value this distinction. Of paramount importance is the academic community's recognition of a figure who, less than a decade earlier, was known predominantly within the circumscribed milieu of Brno's intellectual and artistic circles. The *Laudatio* implicitly conveys profound respect for Janáček's monumental efforts, persistent pursuit of recognition, and steadfast conviction of the value of his musical and literary oeuvre. Until 1916, Janáček was scarcely acknowledged, but he ascended to prominence as a preeminent figure, with this conferment marking a long-anticipated vindication of his artistic stature. Following prolonged neglect by the Prague musical establishment, the 1925 ceremony notably featured Josef Suk, the rector of the Prague Conservatory, and the esteemed composer-conductor Karel Boleslav Jirák. Undoubtedly, their presence conferred a belated yet profoundly significant affirmation on the Moravian musician.

Of exceptional interest are Janáček's meditations on music, patria, and philosophy, articulated within his *Spondeo ac Polliceor*, which constitutes a profound manifesto of extraordinary artistic and civic consciousness.

Leoš Janáček's oeuvre presently commands a distinguished position within the global musical canon, a status that requires no further explication. Nonetheless, the academic ceremony marking the composer's seventieth anniversary illuminates the exceptional scope of his intellectual and artistic vision. Ultimately, the present text stands as a solemn tribute to the Moravian genius.

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