

## Rhythm and metre in Leoš Janáček's early theoretical concept

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**Abstract:** *This piece of research focuses on the first theoretical study published by Leoš Janáček and the way in which the composer understands to include contemporary and ancient philosophical and aesthetic principles in his thinking. We see how the author subordinates his theoretical musical thinking regarding rhythm and metre, as well as his concept of accents and nuances to those principles. My study sheds light on some unclear expressions, on other downright daring and novel ones, attempts to explain them and references the great Czech musician's subsequent theoretical contributions. Beyond statements and hypotheses, the conclusion that I have reached constitutes an impulse to continue the research and go thoroughly into the theoretical concepts set forth by one of the greatest thinker-musicians of humanity.*

Key-words: *Janáček, rhythm, metre, concept, philosophy, aesthetics*

### 1. Introduction

Known as a composer, Leoš Janáček has important contributions in the fields of musical criticism, musicology and ethnomusicology – unfortunately debated and capitalized on less than they should be –, to which a preoccupation for philosophy, aesthetics and linguistics is added. The time spent on and the attention paid to the latter were substantial, while the results of his studies in this direction deserves all our attention nowadays, as well.

Researchers have established the existence of two main directions in the great Czech musician's activity: his work as a composer, and his writings (about music and not only), each of these bearing numerous ramifications (Simeone, Tyrell,

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and Němcová 1997, xxxii-xl). While musical notation does not need translation<sup>2</sup>, the written word stumbles against a language barrier, and if Czech musicologists studied and commented upon Janáček's writings without hindrance, foreign researchers had to wait for the appearance of versions in widely spoken languages. Among the writings published during his life – because many were published after 1928, the year of the musician's death –, those with a theoretical character are very important, which justifies the interest in studying them. The unabridged edition in the Czech language, entitled *Leoš Janáček, Teoretické dílo*, vol. 1, was published in 2007 by Editio Janáček in Brno, care of a collective made up of Leoš Faltus, Eva Drlíková, Svatava Přibáňová and Jiří Zahrádka. In 2020 the same publishing house published the English-language version of the theoretical studies published during his life, entitled *The Published Theoretical Works of Leoš Janáček*, the translation from Czech to English and the editing belonging to musicologist Martin Nedbal<sup>3</sup>.

Happy to possess a copy of this precious volume and to be able to read, even in the English language, the inimitable Czech musician's thoughts, I have chosen to discuss here his first theoretical study, published in 1877, when Janáček had not yet turned 23. Its title is *Všelijaká objasnění melodická a harmonická (Some clarifications on melody and harmony)*<sup>4</sup> and it was published in two issues of the Prague magazine *Cecilie*<sup>5</sup>: iv/1 from 5 January 1877, pages 1-2 and iv/3 from 5 March 1877, pages 19-21<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Objectives

My study wishes to be a contribution to the better knowledge, especially by Romanian musicologists, of Leoš Janáček's theoretical writings, starting from his ceaseless interest for time and words. This piece of research will include general references to fields connected to music, like philosophy and aesthetics, to which I

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<sup>2</sup> In the strict sense of the word; Janáček's musical writing is almost illegible, which is why his scores needed to be copied in order to be deciphered.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary American musicologist specializing in the German and Czech music of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. See <https://crees.ku.edu/people/martin-nedbal>, accessed on 12 June 2023.

<sup>4</sup> This is the translation of the title into the English language in the volume edited by Martin Nedbal.

<sup>5</sup> *Cecilie*, a magazine "of Catholic music", founded in 1874 in Prague by musician and priest Ferdinand Josef Lehner (1837-1914). A supplement from 1877 of this magazine included the motet *Exaudi Deus*, Janáček's first ever published work. (Simeone 2019, 128).

<sup>6</sup> (Simeone, Tyrell, and Němcová 1997, 360). The title of the article in the English language is here *General clarifications of melodic and harmonic matters*.

will add debates about precise matters, such as the philosophical concept of time, extrapolated towards the musical notion of rhythm. Together we will see how all of these marked young Janáček and, especially, how he formulated his first thoughts about rhythm and metre, accents and nuances, under the influence of great thinkers.

### 3. Formative influences

After having begun to learn music as early as his teenage years, in Brno, Janáček went to improve himself in Prague, where from 1874 to 1875 he turned to the theoretical aspects of the art of sounds. "In his intensive year of music studies at the Prague Organ School Janáček would in particular deepen his knowledge of music theory" (Tyrrell, Janáček. *Years of life. Volume I (1854-1914). The lonely blackbird*, chap. 11). Yet, it was not only the field of music, which preoccupied the young musician, he deepened very seriously the study of philosophy and aesthetics. "During his time at the Prague Organ School Janáček also embarked on what would become a lifetime of self-education, in this case picking up subjects not taught there such as aesthetics and music history. On 3 December he began reading Josef Durdík's treatise on aesthetics." (Tyrrell, Janáček. *Years of life. Volume I (1854-1914). The lonely blackbird*, chap. 11).

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but especially in Prague, the cultural and historical period marking the debut of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by Johann Friedrich Herbart's<sup>7</sup> philosophical, psychological and pedagogical thinking, taken over and extended by disciples such as Robert Zimmermann<sup>8</sup> and Josef Durdík<sup>9</sup>. There already was a veritable school of thinking having Herbart as mentor, with representatives in many of the great universities of the empire. "There was a Herbartian school of philosophy in Germany, Austria, and Bohemia until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was also a journal devoted to the study of his philosophy, which lasted for nearly forty years; and, for decades, there were

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<sup>7</sup> Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), German philosopher. According to <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Friedrich-Herbart>, accessed on 13 June 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Robert von Zimmermann (1824-1898), Czech philosopher, Dean of the Philosophy Department in Vienna and then rector of the University in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to <https://geschichte.univie.ac.at/en/persons/robert-von-zimmermann>, accessed on 13 June 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Josef Durdík (1837-1902), Czech philosopher and psychologist. According to [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Josef\\_Durdík](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Josef_Durdík), accessed on 13 June 2023.

Herbartians in virtually every major university in Germany, Austria, and Bohemia.” (Beiser 2022, 1).

Serious, studious and very interested to widen the horizon of his knowledge, Janáček could not but be influenced by the concept of this school of thought, which stated, among other things, that “philosophy, according to Herbart, cannot be characterized by its subject matter but only by its method, which is the reworking (Bearbeitung) of concepts” (Borchert 2006, 321) and that “reality must be understood in terms of the relations between entities.” (Beckerman 1983, 390). Such entities end up by awakening the young musician’s interest, who wants to see how they can be adapted to musical thinking. He begins to be preoccupied by aesthetics and reads with a lot of interest Durdík’s then newly published *Všeobecná Esthetika (General Aesthetics)*, in which “Durdík’s science of aesthetics was based on a system of simple relations which were immediately comprehensible, and the work of art was accordingly created by systems of simple intertwining and integrating relationships. The «totality of these relations» or the «manner of composition» was considered form in the true aesthetic sense.” (Beckerman 1983, 390).

Analyzing the philosophical and aesthetic notions and concepts, Janáček stops on an essential concept, which he would meditate on until the end of this life. He refers to time both from the point of view of its succession – let us mention that the musician bought a chronoscope, an instrument with which he wanted to measure fractions of a second - and from the point of view of musical organization, hence the studies Janáček dedicated to rhythm.

#### **4. First ideas about rhythm and metre**

Finding himself in Prague from 1874 to 1875, there erupts in Janáček’s life what would become a permanent activity, i. e. the publication of writings about music. Beginning in those years, various publications in Bohemia and Moravia – above all with a musical character but not only – would include on their pages announcements about musical events, chronicles of choral and orchestral concerts or opera performances, short analyses of symphonic or lyrical works, composer portraits and – the most important aspect – theoretical thoughts about music signed by Leoš Janáček. To those that do not master the Czech language and wish to study his theoretical ideas, the above-mentioned volume edited by Martin Nedbal offers the exceptional opportunity of diachronically researching the Czech musician’s body of ideas.

Therefore, the first theoretical study signed by Leoš Janáček is entitled *Všelijaká objasnění melodická a harmonická* (*Some clarifications on melody and harmony*). This study bears the number XV/16 in the Catalogue edited by Nigel Simeone, John Tyrrell, and Ludmila Němcová. The previous 15 press articles generally include accounts about various artistic manifestations, therefore the lines I will debate on below are the first, in which Janáček does not have the interpretation of music in mind but makes his theoretical ideas about its components known. The first finding, emphasized by all researchers until now, is that the chosen title is not related to the content, as the author's attention is directed towards rhythm and metre, not at all towards melody and harmony!

Somewhat hypocritically – given the lack of harmony between the title and the content of his own article –, the young musician begins by manifesting his discontent with the fuzziness of the ideas in a didactic work that he was reading. Unfortunately, the title and the author of the textbook, which provokes Janáček's discontent, remain unknown to us: "...to my befuddlement and my great surprise, on nearly every page I come across passages that I simply cannot understand, although I translate and explicate them in various ways, [although] I connect the words with multiple meanings." (Nedbal 2020, 1). Preoccupied that the notions of rhythm and metre be well understood by the pupils learning music in Brno, Janáček begins to display his own thoughts as follows: "Everything that resounds with tones happens *in time*. From the infinite course of time, we select *the smallest segment*: by saying *the smallest*, the segment has already acquired a certain *size*; it has been measured. Let us call *the smallest segment* of time a *time measuring element*, since we will also use it to measure larger portions of the infinite course of time." (Nedbal 2020, 2).

Stating the above, Janáček clearly positions himself in the line of Herbart's thought, who stated that "for any single thing dissolves into a multiplicity of qualities when we describe it; it is at once both a unity and not a unity." (Borchert 2006, 322). The author continues and says that "I can imagine many such elements, all of them called «the smallest» and therefore *equal*. We will now call every compilation of elements a *shape*, and, consequently, in time measurement, the compilation of several time-measuring elements creates a *time-measuring shape*." (Nedbal 2020, 2). Herbart's influence is very clear, whose ideas the musician had reached through Durdík's work, *Všeobecná Esthetika* (*General Aesthetics*).

I now bring to attention another influence, that of the ancient concept of time, rhythm and metre. Might Janáček have read, as early as when he was 22, the works of the Greek philosophers of the Antiquity and their thoughts about music? I cannot state this, nor can I deny it but the resemblance with the way in which the

respective notions were treated by Aristoxenus<sup>10</sup>, for instance, is undoubtable. “In his own writings Aristoxenus distinguishes between rhythm, rhythmizomenon, and rhythmopoeia. «We must imagine», he says, «two different natures, that of rhythm and that of the rhythmizomenon, having the same relations to one another as a plan has to the object that is planned». The rhythmizomenon is the raw material, which is subjected to rhythm; and there are three kinds of rhythmizomenon, namely, music, poetry, and dancing. Melody alone consists of a succession of intervals, without meaning. Only when it is subjected to rhythm does it take shape and form. Ordinary speech consists of a succession of accented and unaccented syllables, in no definite order; when, however, these are subjected to rhythm, the speech becomes poetry. The steps of a person walking or running are continuous, but if they become ordered in some recognizable arrangement by rhythm, the dance arises. Intervals, speech, and steps are the three rhytmizometia, the respective materials to which rhythm is applied. This is the Aristoxenian theory. The material itself, whether melody, speech, or bodily movement, is not rhythm, but when subjected to rhythm, it becomes the «rhythmizomenon,» the «thing rhythmed.»” (Abdy Williams 1911, 26).

Further on, Janáček attempts to explain on the one hand what metre and rhythm represent, on the other the differences between them, again turning to philosophical notions, which include graphic exemplification. Here is what he says about metre: “*A meter is a time-measuring shape consisting of time-measuring elements. Or, to say it in a way that is understandable to everyone: A meter is a time-measuring shape that consists in equal beats. We have just defined a metric shape that consists of segments with equal lengths. Let us now proceed. We have been given a time-measuring shape consisting of three beats: each beat would be equal to a quarter note. Thus we will get another sketch, in which 1 equals a b, 2 = b c, 3= c d. Since the beats are equal in the time-measuring shape, it would be called a meter, more specifically a triple meter, which corresponds to the musical symbols of either 3/4, 3/8, 3/2, etc. [...] [The main purpose of meters] is to provide a basic for consequential time-measuring shapes, also referred to as *rhythms*.” (Nedbal 2020, 2).*

Regarding metre (the bar system) and its role, I consider that Janáček’s explanation is clear and does not require subsequent clarifications. However, when he refers to rhythm, things start to become complex and it is hard to understand, at least at first, what the musical notion of rhythm signifies. The author considers it to

<sup>10</sup> Aristoxenus (4<sup>th</sup> century BC), Greek philosopher, the first researcher of music theory in the classical world. According to <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristoxenus>, accessed on 14 June 2023.

be made up of forms of measuring time, containing unequal, yet proportional segments, which is further proof of the influences of Herbart and Durdík's philosophy and aesthetics. A supplementary difficulty is represented by Janáček's references to Gregorian chant, which he already knew, but which could be unfamiliar to the pupils – or other beginners of music –, to whom the explanation is addressed. Let us admit that, in order to be understood, the following phrase necessitates countless explanations but also previous solid knowledge: "...in regards to the [theory of] *meter*, i.e., the basic time-measuring shapes, [a whole piece of] Roman chant comprises one simple, single measure, i.e., all Roman singers would use an endless straight timeline divided into equal segments to create resultant time-measuring shapes, i.e., *rhythms*." (Nedbal 2020, 3). I reproduce here a drawing, which wishes and mostly manages to be explanatory and conclusive (Nedbal 2020, 4):

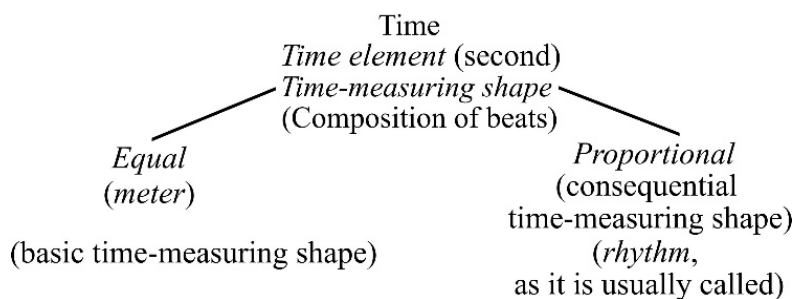


Fig. 1. "*Time – metre – rhythm, in Leoš Janáček's concept of 1877*"

After explaining his vision of rhythm, the author passes on to explaining the notion of accent, in this way approaching again the ancient philosophical theory of rhythm. He relates accent to intensity and, theorizing the system of nuances, he sees it as a ladder, whose steps are expressed by a few levels of accentuation. "Accents are not single entities; we classify them according to strength into accentual levels. We are going to divide each dynamic level into four accentual levels [...] the cumulative strength of four accentual levels would equal one dynamic [level]. The only missing component is a mathematical definition of a single level to fix the whole scale." (Nedbal 2020, 4).

Janáček states (and exemplifies through drawings) that as the temperate musical system consists in melodic scales made up of intervals, likewise there is temperate system of dynamic scales, made up of levels of accentuation. Moreover,

these levels are indissolubly linked to the aesthetic sensations perceived by the listener of the respective music, being in fact “the cause of the [aesthetic] pleasure”. It is a very bold opinion, which I do not know how many musicians, of yore or nowadays, consider just. Anyway, the temperate system of intensities is a topic deserving a serious and profound debate.

Upon reading the study, we ascertain the incipient existence of the concept of *nápěvky mluvy* (*speech melodies*), which the composer would elaborate later, and the way in which accents influence the meaning of the words itself. “We do not need to prove that common speech contains accents; we simply point out that accentual shapes of common speech are varied and significant, because changing them also immediately brings out a change of thought relationships [“*myšlenkový vztah*,” i.e., semantic connotation].” (Nedbal 2020, 5). Further on, Janáček returns in brief to the Gregorian chant and compares its notation to the current system, stating that “where mensuration was a symbol of the past, accentual-time-measuring shapes are symbol of the present.” (Nedbal 2020, 5).

Finally, Janáček’s study proposes a new clarification of the difference between rhythm and metre, which consists in accents and their succession. There appears here, in brief, quite an unclear reference to what we understand nowadays under pulsation, exemplified thus:

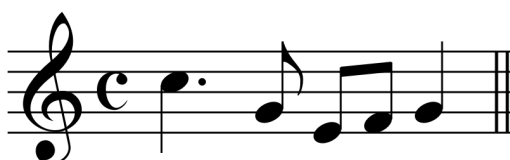


Fig. 2. *Pulsation and metre*

“This section of the tune is therefore not based on a quadruple, but on an *octuple* meter; only its *accentual* shape is based on a *quadruple* meter.” (Nedbal 2020, 6). Again, the author’s learned thinking is quite difficult to understand by a musician-in-training, who requires very clear and succinct explanations about the notions of rhythm and metre but especially about the differences between them. I underline this necessity because the last phrase of the study signed by Leoš Janáček is not only surprising but can allow room for endless discussion. “My goal [...] was to discuss, on its own, the most subtle relationship between time-measuring and accentual elements: as a *time-measuring-accentual meter*.” (Nedbal 2020, 6).



## 5. Conclusions

Even if very young and still on his way towards assimilating the means of musical expression, Leoš Janáček proves in the study *Všelijaká objasnění melodická a harmonická* (*Some clarifications on melody and harmony*) capacities of observation and synthesis announcing precocious maturity. Upon carefully reading the lines he wrote, relating his ideas to the philosophy and aesthetics that he was influenced by, we ascertain the validity of his opinions, how interesting and sometimes novel they are, even if their expression sometimes lacks clarity. In time, this complexity of expression unfortunately led to the rejection of most of his theoretical ideas.

The terminology used by Janáček provokes difficulties of understanding even in this study of youth, while the fact that he later invents a few musical terms – of course, in the Czech language, therefore extremely difficult to translate -, only estranges many of those who would have appreciated his ideas. One of the researchers of his activity states that “one of Janáček's most characteristic and frustrating traits, that of coining new terms to describe what he perceived as new phenomena, has its roots in Durdík's style and approach” (Beckerman 1983, 395), which represents a new influence, this time negative, of one of the philosophers who modelled his thinking.

The volume translated and edited by Martin Nedbal is priceless, because it presents researchers with musicological material, which had not been accessible until very recently. For Romanian musicians, this is a wonderful opportunity to go thoroughly into the inheritance of a thoughtful, visionary and bold composer, who had the courage of expressing his ideas without hindrance but also the patience of waiting for the real importance of his works to be recognized in the concert of international modern music.

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