

Living in the Ice Age

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Damiano Michieletto's new staging of *Jenůfa* – intended originally as part of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden's ongoing Janáček cycle in collaboration with Sir Simon Rattle – was one of the many productions sidelined during the Covid pandemic. Although it had its première in February of 2021, performed to an empty house and streamed online, it would have to wait another year before its debut in front of an audience. With a slightly altered cast and musical direction taken over by Thomas Guggeis, the first public performance was a triumph, placing considerable vocal riches in the service of a thoroughly engrossing drama.

Mr Michieletto's excellent staging was something of a rarity in that it seemed wholly at ease within the symbolic logic of its presiding concept. The action was set in a large cube-shaped space, slightly offset from the geometry of the stage and lined by several layers of textured, translucent floor-to-ceiling partitions which allowed characters to enter and exit from the back, albeit along an indirect path. The space itself was empty save for a few austere wooden benches, which were reconfigured for different scenes, and one bench with a handful of candles and religious artefacts; the set suggested a modernist church, and the figures who came and went, dressed primarily in greys and whites, did not seem to belong to any specific time or place.

The first act established the staging as a well-directed, if fairly straightforward drama. The minimalist neutrality of the setting offered little to distract from the succession of elegantly crafted scenes, in which the complex relationships and character dynamics of the story were rendered with unfussy clarity. Mr Michieletto often used the volume and emptiness of the stage to great effect: in the scene between Jenůfa and Števa, a growing alienation was underlined by their positions at the opposite ends of a very long bench. Yet nothing seemed forced – there were no visual flourishes that drew unwanted attention to their own ingenuity – and even the act's one conspicuously odd moment, in which the drunk Števa hauled a giant block of ice onto the stage, seemed acceptable within the context of the action. If the staging often seemed understated, its attention to character and lack of ponderous conceptual baggage were decidedly refreshing.

Michieletto, Jenůfa
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**Berlin, domingo,
22 de mayo de
2022.** Staatsoper
Unter den Linden.
Janáček: Jenůfa.

Damiano Michieletto, director. Hanna Schwarz (Grandmother). Stephan Rügamer (Laca). Alexey Dolgov (Števa). Evelyn Herlitzius (Kostelníčka). Asmik Gregorian (Jenůfa). Jan Martiník (Foreman). David Oštrek (Mayor). Natalia Skrycka (Mayor's Wife). Evelin Novak (Karolka). Staatskapelle Berlin. Thomas Guggeis, conductor





Janáček: Jenůfa. Damiano Michieletto, director. Thomas Guggeis, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, May 2022. © 2022 by Bernd Uhlig.

It was only mid-way through the second act, when a large iceberg began to descend from the ceiling, that the symbolic order of the staging locked into focus. The ice which Števa had brought on stage and the ice to which the unwanted baby was soon to be consigned were not mere thematic threads, they were part of the continuum in which the staging took place; it was suddenly apparent that the set itself was intended to resemble a large ice cube in which the passion and reason of the characters had been frozen into immobility. The image was so perfectly suited to the action that Mr Michieletto felt no need to overstate it. While the iceberg was an intriguing presence in the second act, and was used to even greater effect in the third, it was never allowed to eclipse the action;

the characters went about their business oblivious to the giant metaphor hanging directly above them.

If Mr Michieletto brought style and intelligence to the drama, it was Evelyn Herlitzius who gave the evening its most arresting jolts of unfiltered emotion. There was no more galvanic moment in the first act than the Kostelnička arriving to put the drunken Števa in his place, and it gained its excitement not merely through Ms Herlitzius's vocal power, but by the way in which she was able to compress so much complexity of character into the span of a relatively brief scene. If the other characters seemed mere figures in a drama, the Kostelnička was a living distillation of the complex back-story on which the drama was constructed, and in berating Števa, she revealed her own past disappointments and a bitterness that would dictate her future actions.

Ms Herlitzius was even better in the second act: over the course of four captivating scenes – with Jenůfa, with Števa, with Laca and, finally, alone with the crib – the death of the child evolved naturally and plausibly from an evil thought into an unquestionable necessity. What made the performance so terrifying – and so thrilling – was her ability to convince not only herself, but also the audience, that her actions came not from a malicious heart, but rather from a genuine, if misplaced, desire to save Jenůfa from a future of misery. While her chilling pronouncement at the climax of the second act and her appearances throughout the third were fraught with fear and grief, Ms Herlitzius kept the character far from any hints of instability or madness, and her final scene, in which the truth of her actions could no longer be denied, was presented with magnificent lucidity.

If no other performances could rival Ms Herlitzius in sheer intensity, the grandmother of Hanna Schwarz was a close match in vocal power. Although a considerably smaller role, her appearances in the first act were commanding through clarity of tone and ease of projection; she suggested a figure who had once been as strong-willed as the Kostelnička, but who had retained a greater degree of compassion. Stephan Rügamer provided the evening with an engaging Laca whose plaintive tone and impassioned delivery was often highly expressive without ever growing wayward. If he was never



Janáček: Jenůfa. Damiano Michieletto, director. Thomas Guggeis, conductor.

convincingly dangerous – even his violent outbursts in the first act could not efface his gentleness – one never doubted his firmly held (if awkwardly expressed) affection for Jenůfa. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, May 2022. © 2022 by Bernd Uhlig.

Asmik Gregorian's performance of the title role was consistently beautiful in tone and phrasing, and her prayer in the second act was a moment of rapturous purity amidst the gathering desperation. As a character, however, she often seemed meek and deferential, accepting the abuses of Števa and the controlling wisdom of the Kostelnička with demure restraint. This may have been a feature of the staging, which was interested less in Jenůfa herself than the surrounding forces which had numbed her to the point of passivity; certainly in the final scenes of the third act – a moving plea for the Kostelnička's pardon followed by tentative attempts to reject Laca – Ms Gregorian revealed greater complexity and authority than she had allowed in her earlier appearances.

Thomas Guggeis led the orchestra through a finely measured, tightly controlled performance, attentive to the rhythmic steadiness underpinning many of the opera's most volatile scenes. Although Mr Guggeis was rarely prone to exaggeration and favoured a lean detailed orchestral sound over any excesses of lustrous passion, the music that emerged was articulate, well-paced and wholly sympathetic to the spirit of Mr Michieletto's staging, in which only a little heat was required to trigger an unstoppable thaw.