Creative Ideas and Aesthetic Emotions in the Sonata for Violin and Piano by Leoš Janáček

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ABSTRACT – Apart from several works that are emblematic of the 20th-century operatic repertoire, Leoš Janáček is also the author of works for violin and piano, of which the Sonata catalogued as JW VII/7 is the most prominent. Through the historical overview below, this study aims to highlight its place among the chamber works of the Czech composer, with an emphasis on the chronology of the composer’s multifaceted activity between 1914 (when he began composing it) and 1922 (when its final version saw the light of day). The analysis explores the depths of the creative process and, apart from dealing with the instrumental and compositional techniques and procedures, it focuses on messages, emotions and ethos. The research dwells on a few details related to sonority, especially to the ancestral, archetypal and folk vein of the music, and on the way the piano and violin, in turn, must make us hear a cimbalom. We see that the traditional sonata form allows for modern creative interpretations, anchored in the vivid substance of folklore, and no less in the composer’s fertile imagination. For performers, Leoš Janáček’s Sonata for Violin and Piano is not a technical challenge, but rather the path towards conveying the emotions of one of the most original composers of the 20th century.

Keywords: Janáček, sonata, cimbalom, folklore, imitation.

Introduction

If we examine the catalogue of Leoš Janáček’s instrumental works, we find that 33 solo works (catalogued as JW VIII) were dedicated to the keyboard instruments (piano, organ, harmonium), while the chamber works (catalogued as JW VII) include only 13 works, in a diversity that also denotes a certain balance. There are seven works written for five instrumental combinations:

- four violins: JW VII/1 and JW VII/2;
- string quartet: JW VII/8 and JW VII/13;
- wind sextet: JW VII/10;
- piano, two violins, viola, clarinet, horn and bassoon: JW VII 11;
- piano left hand, flute/piccolo, two trumpets, three trombones and tenor tuba: JW VII/12.

The other 6 works are written for chamber duos:

- violin and piano: JW VII/3, JW VII/4 and JW VII/7;
- cello and piano: JW VII/5 and JW VII/6;

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1 Simeone, Tyrrell and Němcová, Janáček’s Works. A Catalogue of the Music and Writings of Leoš Janáček.
3 The first quartet, written in 1923, is entitled Kvartet z podnětu L. N. Tolstého “Kreutzerovy sonáty” [Quartet after L. N. Tolstoy’s “Kreutzer Sonata”]. According to the electronic source in note 2.
4 The Second Quartet, written in 1928, is entitled Listy důvěrné [Intimate Letters]. According to the electronic source in note 2.
5 Composed in 1924, entitled Mládí [Youth]. According to the electronic source in note 2.
7 Composed in 1926, entitled Cappuccio. According to the electronic source in note 2.
8 Composed in 1879, entitled Romance. According to the electronic source in note 2.
10 Begun in 1914, entitled Sonûta. According to the electronic source in note 2.
11 Entitled Pohádka [Fairy Tale], the work is based on a poem by Vasili Zhukovski and has 3 variants: 1910, 1912 and 1923. According to the electronic source in note 2.
12 Entitled Presto, the year of composition is unclear. According to the electronic source in note 2.
With regard to the violin, we notice that Leoš Janáček leaned rather timidly towards its soloist side, and that of the three works mentioned above, the first two were written between 1879 and 1880, a period when the composer was still searching for his own forms of musical expression.

However, there also existed other fragments of works or complete works for violin and piano composed by Janáček, but they have disappeared for various reasons. In the catalogue compiled by Nigel Simeone, John Tyrrell and Alena Němcová, as well as on the leosjanacek.eu website, at the JW X index we find more or less detailed information on 23 works considered lost, four of which were dedicated to the violin-piano duo.

The first work for violin and piano included here is JW X/8, dated 1879 and entitled Romanzen. The second lost work is a Sonata (No. 1) for violin and piano, dated 1880 and catalogued as JW X/12. “Janáček wrote to Zdenka Schulzová on 14 Jan 1880 that he was beginning work on a violin sonata. On 18 Jan 1880 he reported to her that «two movements are already finished», commenting that the work was «not all that original and fresh but on the other hand pleasant, calm, and formally quite correct, which is what I was aiming at». He made no further reference to this work or to any other movements.”

1880 is also the year of composition of a Second Sonata for Violin and Piano, catalogued as JW X/16 and which, once completed, was performed and rejected in a composition competition at the Vienna Conservatory, where Janáček was a student at the time. The rejection of this work caused deep frustration to the composer and was one of the reasons why he abandoned his studies in the capital of the Habsburg Empire. “The only evidence for the existence of this work are the references in Janáček’s letters to Zdenka Schulzová, and press reports of its Brno performance in 1881, together with Janáček’s comments in his diary about them.”

The fourth and last lost work for violin and piano is entitled Komar [Mosquito], catalogue number JW X/23, and was written in the final years of the composer’s life. Thus, had the four works listed above been preserved, we would have inherited a corpus of seven pieces for violin and piano, three of which would have been sonatas. The only sonata that has survived and whose score we have at our disposal will be the subject of this analysis.

### Historical Overview

In 1914, the year in which he turned 60 and his name was becoming more widely known, the Czech composer began working on a Sonata for violin and piano, the last one of this genre and, as we have seen, the only one left with this title from his entire oeuvre. The work was completed in 1922, after multiple variants of elaboration and reorganization of the four constituent movements. In 1914, only the movement entitled Ballada was completed, which was even published individually, in 1915. Until its 1922 publication, the sonata underwent the following stages:

Between 1915 and publication in 1922, the work was extensively revised. The original first movement, Con moto, was completely rewritten using the same thematic material. The original second movement was the Adagio that eventually became the fourth movement. The Ballada moved from being the third movement to the second and was replaced by a new Allegretto. The finale gave Janáček the most problems: originally a Con moto, it was replaced in about 1916 by a new Allegro, which in turn was replaced by the Adagio. The final order thus became: 1. Con moto; 2. Ballada; 3. Allegretto; 4. Adagio. It was only when Janáček looked at the Sonata again before publication in 1922 that this definitive state of the work was settled.

This was also the year of its absolute première, given at the Klub moravských skladatelů in Brno, on April 24, by František Kudláček (violin) and Jaroslav Kvapil (piano). It was also in 1922, but on December 16, that the first Prague performance was given by violinist Karel Hoffmann and pianist Václav Štěpán, followed by the first Vienna performance in 1923, and then by the enthusiastically received first London performance in 1926.

It is well known that once the compositional process was finished, Janáček used to revise and correct his works rigorously and more than once. Sometimes he would start correcting them immediately, sometimes after several years, during which time he would focus on other creative projects. Between 1914 and 1922, while working on the Sonata for violin and piano, the Czech musician carries out the following activities of composition/correction/revision:

- composes and revises the rhapsody for orchestra Taras Bulba;
- composes several choral pieces for various vocal ensembles and works for voice and piano;
- starts working on an opera that he will never finish (Živá mrtvola [The Living Corpse], after Tolstoy’s play);

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16 Simeone, The Janáček Compendium, 206.
17 Moravian Composers’ Club in Brno. Presided over by Janáček, it was founded in 1922 with the aim of promoting the music of Moravian composers, among others. Simeone, The Janáček Compendium, 20-21.
18 Information taken from Simeone, The Janáček Compendium, 207.
composes and revises an epilogue for the opera Výlety to Brouček do Měsíce [The Excursions of Mr. Brouček to the Moon];

- composes the opera Výlety pana Broučka do XV. století [The Excursions of Mr. Brouček to the 15th Century] and then merges the two operas into one, entitled Výlety páně Broučkovy [The Excursions of Mr. Brouček];
- revises the opera Šárka;
- composes and revises the song cycle for tenor, alto, three female voices and piano Zapisník zmizelého [The Diary of the One Who Disappeared];
- composes the opera Kát a Kabanová;
- composes the symphonic poem Balada blanická [The Ballad of Blaník];
- revises the cantata for tenor, male choir and orchestra Na Soláni čarták [There Upon the Mountain];
- finally, he begins work on the opera Příhody lišky Bystroušky [The Cunning Little Vixen].

Worth mentioning are also the numerous events attended by the composer – première of operas and first performances of other works, visits abroad – and, unfortunately, the appearance of some health problems. During all this time, his zest for work is outstanding, his imagination is overflowing, and his successes and recognition are starting to appear.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the Sonata, we should note that the score we are using was published during Leoš Janáček’s lifetime, so it is clear that the author supervised this version, including the violin part, edited by Rudolf Reissig. Another version of the violin part, arranged by Josef Suk, can be found on the Internet, with slightly different manners of performance from those of Reissig. "In a letter to Otakar Nebuška (21 Jan 1922 [...] ), Janáček wrote that the work was composed as a response to Russian advances at the beginning of World War I. Such a dating is seemingly confirmed by the date «1 Aug 1914» halfway through the autograph sketches." His satisfaction with the advance of the Russian army – we should not forget the composer’s pro-Russian feelings – was the impetus that prompted Janáček to start composing the work. There is no evidence that the author’s enthusiasm was transferred to the character of the piece, nor that, once completed, the Sonata had any connection with the initial feelings. Most probably not. Before moving on to the actual analysis, we should note that the second movement of the piece is the only one to which, apart from the tempo, a precise name is attributed, Ballada. The difference from the other three movements comes from the fact that Janáček originally wrote and published the Ballada in 1915 as a standalone piece, and only later incorporated it into the structure of the Sonata for violin and piano.

Analysis of the Work

The 1st movement, Con moto: it consists of a musical material of folk origins, with ancestral, archetypal roots, cast in a classical sonata form. The five flats in the key signature have nothing to do with the tonal system, as Janáček adds the key signature only for ease of reading, because all the respective notes are altered downwards. A three-measure introduction, by the solo violin, contains several intervallic leaps with an imitative and repetitive character, whose notes actually indicate a predominantly progressive musical expression.

Ex. 1. Leoš Janáček, Sonata for violin and piano, Introduction of the sonata form (mm. 1-3).

20 Janáček, Sonata Violin & Piano.
24 Josef Suk (1874-1935), Czech composer and violinist, student and then son-in-law of Antonín Dvořák. A close friend of Janáček, he anonymously edited the score of his first quartet before it was published by Hudební Matic Mušelček Besedy, in 1925. See Simeone, The Janáček Compendium, 221-222.
25 No information has been found to indicate if Janáček was familiar with and agreed to Suk’s proposals.
A close look reveals a falling pentatonic line consisting of a four-note scale followed by a leap of a minor third. In this context, E natural appears as an added note, or an appoggiatura.

Ex. 2. Leoš Janáček, Sonata for violin and piano, sound structure of the Introduction.

Thus, the path is opened for the exposition, more precisely for theme 1, in which, by means of two expressive devices, the above-mentioned folk quality of the music is imposed even from the first measures. The former expressive device is an obvious modalism, consisting of a group of four notes (let us call them primary), to which three more are added, with a secondary effect.

Ex. 3. Leoš Janáček, Sonata for violin and piano, sound structure of theme 1.

We notice that some of the notes also occur in the note group from the introduction, and we also notice the syntactic differentiation of the two sound structures: the former one is melodic (horizontal, see Ex. 2), while the latter is harmonic (vertical, see Ex. 3). Although the discussion about the note groups previously exposed can acquire various facets, the remark is based both on the research of the score and on the feeling – quite strong during the performance and therefore loaded with subjectivity – of old, archetypal. Especially with regard to the latter expressive device used throughout theme 1, more precisely in the piano part, the sound impression conveyed is that of a... cimbalom (see mm. 3–6). Here we sense a pronounced folk flavour of an ancestral struck string instrument, while the violin intones (narrates) a soft and slightly sad melody reminiscent of a ballad (see theme 1 of the exposition, mm. 4–16).

Of particular significance in this context are the opinions of one of the researchers of Janáček’s folklore collecting activity.

It was the perpetual source of his inspiration, the vitalizing agency from which sprang his declamatory realism, his characteristic melody, and his individual harmony and rhythm. And it was his source which, at a time when European music inclined to a cosmopolitan eclecticism, saved him from the clichés of this eclecticism and from the perfervid extremes of the post-modernist period. […] Almost twenty years before Bartók, Janáček had drawn attention to the rhythmic variety, the modality, and frequent exotic and archaic tonalities, the unorthodox harmonies and modulations, and last but not least, to the strange magic that rounds through to the accompaniments of the Eastern Moravian and Slovak melodies, by bagpipes, dulcimer (cimbalon) and other instruments. 27

The cimbalom flavour is maintained until the end of the 1st movement of the sonata, during which time the Czech composer thinks in an almost minimalistic way, with an impressive economy of expressive means and sound material, because both the bridge, entrusted to the piano, and theme 2, are branches of the same trunk. An even more subtle stylization of the folklore occurs in theme 2, where vague archetypal intonations combine with an alternation of major seconds, exposed in contrary motion. In an ambience of subtle major inflexions, they can make up an incomplete tone scale (see mm. 33–34).

The exposition ends with a five-measure long conclusion (see mm. 38–42), consisting in fact of the imitative play of the violin and piano with a motif derived from theme 1. Further on, the development is more of a middle section than one of motivic treatment, perhaps also because of the quite obvious similarity between the two themes of the exposition. We notice chains of descending sequences in certain piano passages, while the violin is intoning trills. Although there is a great similarity with the piano fragment from theme 2 – that of the alternation of major seconds in contrary motion –, the beginning of the development is marked by a constantly fluctuating play between two seconds that unevenly morph from major to minor. The rhythmic design is also different, more specific to the cimbalom than to the piano (see mm. 44–47).

Also present is the imitation of small motifs, so often used by Janáček in his mature years, a technique used in the middle measures of the development, as well as at its end, in preparation for the recapitulation.

27 Hollander, Leoš Janáček. His Life and Work, 89-90.

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At measure 66, there is a verbatim return of theme 1. The continuation appears surprising, in that the melody of the bridge is transposed up a fifth (perfect, diminished in one place), whereas the melody of theme 2 is transposed down a third (always minor). Along with this transposition, which is a clear allusion to the dialectic of the classical sonata, we notice very small changes in the presentation of the sound material, in terms of an inversion of the entrance order of the two instruments in theme 2 (piano – violin in the exposition, violin – piano in the recapitulation). The coda restates almost verbatim the music from the conclusion of the exposition, with small transpositions of harmony, and the 1st movement of Leoš Janáček’s Sonata for Violin and Piano ends on a melancholic, tender note.

The music, in its entirety, is of a distinctive, slightly strange beauty given its archaic origins, with all the elements of the musical discourse being kept within balanced limits. Rhythm and meter, two of the components so characteristic of Janáček’s entire oeuvre, are also much less agitated than we would have expected. The composer has no intention of exposing any special technique of instrumental writing, nor the ambition to present some never-before-seen compositional ideas, but rather subordinates everything to an aesthetic of subtlety, discretion and even fragility. Simply put, beautiful melodies are accompanied by befitting harmonies.

The 2nd movement, *Con moto*: reveals a totally different sonic landscape from the previous movement of the *Sonata*. Its title *Ballada* is somewhat deceiving, as the music transports us into a contemplative world of great sensibility, intensely melancholic and therefore specific to the lyrical genre of the elegy. Arguably enough, the existence here of an epic thread specific to the ballad is nevertheless much less evident than in the previous movement. In any case, there is no folk vein in question here, as the means of musical expression – melody, harmony, rhythm – are all related to art music and remind in some places of the sadness and passions of the Norwegian Edvard Grieg. There are some very solid arguments in support of the art music expression of the musical material of the second movement.

The first argument starts from the key signature, now part of a tonal route that can be easily recognized. The four sharps create the sound substance of the relative keys of C sharp minor and E major, the first ones that define the musical discourse. The change of key signature at measure 77 brings back the five flats encountered previously, except that now they no longer serve to avoid accidentals, but are integrated into the structure of the key of D flat major. It should be noted that the new key is established before the change of key signature, when the four sharps are still present in the key signature. After D flat major, Janáček takes the step towards its dominant, A flat major, but no longer changes the key signature. Therefore, the 2nd movement is governed by four keys: E major; C sharp minor; D flat major; A flat major (whose decisive importance we will see later). The relationship between keys is no longer to be demonstrated, but we can nonetheless discuss Janáček’s option, more precisely the reason why he sometimes passes very quickly from the zone of the sharp keys (E major and C sharp minor) to that of the flat keys (D flat major and A flat major). In the circle of fifths, the respective keys are apart, but through the masterful use of enharmony, their ethos is brought to the common denominator of the emotions filled with love. The tonal framework also includes the ephemeral appearance of several other keys, which are reached through different modulations from the traditional ones used in Classical and Romantic music.

A second argument that supports the art music compositional thinking is the formal structure, more precisely the juxtapositions of musical periods (stanzas) and phrases (lines) of various sizes, whose intersections can also be recognized due to the tonal route. The structure of the entire construction is as follows:

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28 The enharmonic key of D flat major is C sharp major, which in turn is the parallel key of C sharp minor.
Beyond the schematic, arid and inexpressive representation above, the music is wonderful and delicate, with only a few passing moments of turbulence. Let us also see some examples.

In the first phrase of the 2nd movement, namely the a1 in the A section, the violin plays a quiet melody evoking feelings of a diaphanous melancholy, while the piano plays a double role: the right hand follows the melody through small strings of thirty-second notes, while the left hand provides its foundation. The phrase is gentle, elegiac (see the 2nd movement, mm. 1-10).

The B section reverses the process and begins with the piano as the instrument taking the melodic initiative derived from the arpeggiated harmonies, while the violin line remains fixed. As can be seen in the example above, the second major section has five four-measure subdivisions, in which the melody alternates from piano to violin and vice versa, with the instruments taking over from each other the active or static role. The following example shows the same sound material in the keys of D flat major and A flat major, with the shift of the melody from the piano to the violin, all in an intimate atmosphere, recalling some pleasant, tender moments (see the 2nd movement, mm. 17-24).

Section C maintains the same intimate character, although a glimmer of hope is now appearing that a love once lost but never forgotten might be rekindled. The optimism of rediscovery is nevertheless tempered, lacking exuberance, while the fear of failing again is still looming. The piano resumes the strings of thirty-second notes and the violin remains in its low register, but here the G string must sound dolce, without harshness or pathos.
After presenting the musical material of the C phrase, Janáček repeats the B phrase without changing anything and then continues with C, this time embellished by the change of the violin’s register to the upper register and the transposition to A flat major (but with five flats in the key signature), compared to the D flat major (with four sharps in the key signature and accidentals) in the first presentation. The ethos of the music remains nevertheless the same. The ambience changes slightly beginning with measure 108, when the music becomes almost exuberant, with the violin soaring towards the horizon of fulfilment, giving the composer the first and only opportunity to leave the initial rhythmic pattern, without, however, giving it the importance of a change of meter (see the 2nd movement, mm. 108-116).

Towards the end of the movement, we hear the a\textsuperscript{1} melody again, this time in the register of the second and third octaves, which gives the listener an impression of reconciliation, of emotional stability, whereafter the last ten measures forming the coda discreetly bring back the melodic-rhythmic motif of c. The violin line starts from the low register and, with the help of some soft arpeggios, reaches the area of the very high register of the fourth octave. Fineness, discretion and a slight incertitude (due to the fluctuating major and minor third of a chord with the tonic on C sharp) characterize the mood conveyed by the last combinations of notes of the violin and piano, repeated like a lover’s melancholic gaze towards a past whose flame seems irretrievably extinguished (see the 2nd movement, Coda, mm. 129-138).

Thus ends a music of diamantine beauty, whose formal structure should be understood only as a carrier of expression, of the emotional message. It is clear that Janáček was not at all concerned with exposing any (violin, piano or compositional) technique, but that he merely put down on paper feelings and thoughts that belong to the general human affectivity, which he managed to express so truthfully.

The 3rd movement, allegretto: although one might be surprised again by the lack of continuity with the previous movement, the inconsistency is only apparent. The similarities with the first movement of the Sonata, especially in terms of the musical material, lead us to indisputable folk roots, except that here we seem to hear a contemporary folklore, less stylized and obviously more concrete, and therefore far from the archetypal impression of the beginning.

In the introduction to the study, we saw the works on which Janáček worked more or less concurrently with the Sonata analysed here. One of them is an operatic masterpiece, Kát’a Kabanová, an “opera in three acts with libretto by Janáček after Alexander Nikolayevich Ostrovsky’s play The Thunderstorm [Groza] in the Czech translation by Vincenc Cervinka. Composed between January 1920 and April 1921, with minor revisions in December 1921; interludes added in November 1927.”

At the beginning of the second scene of the second act, Kudrjaš, one of the characters, sings a song whose melody is as follows:

![Ex. 6. Leoš Janáček, Kudrjaš’s song from the second scene of the second act of the opera Kát’a Kabanová.](image)

We clearly distinguish two eight-measure phrases, A and B, each consisting of two four-measure segments, in which the second one repeats the first one and the fourth one repeats the third one, with the last one actually being the transposition down a perfect fourth of the first segment. Repetition and transposition are therefore the defining elements of the song, along with the quarter note isorhythm and the half note cadence.

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29 Simeone, The Janáček Compendium, 112.
The beginning of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement of the Sonata for violin and piano is very similar to the above fragment from the opera Kát’a Kabanová. To illustrate this, only the melodic line (oscillating between the piano and the violin) will be similarly presented, without the connecting fragments.

We recognize the same type of melodic-rhythmic construction, except that here the free imitation also occurs, allowing the intervals to be slightly modified from one segment to another. We can admit that the folk roots of the music might come from a peasant from the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

We will now return to the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement of the sonata, which is marked by a tonal harmonic organization that revolves around the key of A flat minor, even though the key signature includes only six flats. One cannot overlook the first-degree relationship between the key of C sharp minor in which the 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement ended, and the key used here, more precisely its enharmonic equivalent, G sharp minor. The composer remains consistent with the concept of tonal kinship and especially with the play with the enharmonic principle, which links together keys that are several fifths apart. Of course, the ambience of A flat minor is completed and expanded by moving and altered notes, resulting in a permanent tonal-modal fluctuation. Although we have already discussed certain characteristics of the beginning of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement, a thorough understanding of its aesthetic content requires a focused analysis of form. The five pages of the score reveal a clear two-part song form with a reprise: A (mm. 1-24); B (mm. 25-64); small transition (mm. 65-79); A (mm. 79-102).

This second A (which we intentionally did not notate as A’, but only as A) reiterates the first one verbatim, without any changes. Let us see what happens in each section.

The main character of section I, A (mm. 1-24), is the piano, which plays successively, from one hand to another and from one register to another, the motifs exemplified above. The violin plays only scales of seven descending notes, starting on notes in ascending succession (see the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement, mm. 10-16).

For the first time in the entire work, Janáček makes use of an aksak rhythm, by repeating the formula of one eighth note next to a group of four eighth notes, a rhythm notated in mixed meter, whose pulsation must be the eighth note.

Here, along with the rhythm, we could also discuss the grouping of eighth notes in measure 15 (on individual beats) and measure 16 (over the entire measure), as well as the subsequent expressive legato only in the right hand, although we are not sure whether to attribute these notations to the composer or to the publisher. We might believe that Janáček himself thought of them and wrote them down, because at least the groupings of eighth notes have clear musical justifications. The inconsistency of writing the expressive legato only in the right hand can also be attributed to him, when both hands actually play the same notes, separated by octaves. Whether real or just speculative, the above details may be important for a research specifically focused on the notation of the sonata. The last three measures of the A section clearly establish the key of A flat minor, because the root position chord is repeated just as many times from the tonic of this key (see the 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement, mm. 22-24).
Section II, B, presents a method that was widely used by Janáček in his mature years, namely that of stringing together sequences of the same motif or sequences of closely related motifs. The 40 measures actually comprise six musical segments that use the techniques of motivic sequencing and expansion in the already-known practice of passing the melody from one instrument to another. A polyphonic play between the two instruments also occurs, in the form of the simultaneous 2/8 and 3/8 meters, a delightful moment for the listener and a challenging one for the researcher’s eye. Although the B section would deserve a full exemplification, only its “conducting line” will be presented here, more specifically the evolution of the melody on a single staff, to bring into view the above-mentioned sequences and expansions.

At this point, Janáček feels the need to pave the way for what follows next, so he introduces a small transition fragment (mm. 65-78) in which he uses sequences from the folk motif from A, played pizzicato by the violin and whose sonority brings to mind the cimbalom from the 1st movement of the Sonata. As a stop along the way, the composer requires the piano to play the half-cadence on the dominant of the key of A flat minor, to which he intends to return (see the 3rd movement, mm. 76-78). The return to the key of A flat minor is realized by the complete resumption, with no modification, of the A section, in that previously mentioned reprise. Only now can we understand the final meaning of the three measures I referred to above (see the 3rd Movement, mm. 22-24).

It is an unequivocal sound gesture of completion of an action.

Not even the 3rd movement of the Sonata brings anything new in the technical expression of the two protagonist instruments, as string plucking and double stopping in the violin had been commonly used techniques for a long time. Janáček certainly does this intentionally, because he uses other devices to convey his aesthetic messages to the listener. Such devices include in particular the reiterated motifs, their sequential repetition and transformation, which are techniques derived from the speech melodies (nápevky mluvy), which the Czech composer would note with an almost pedantic attention to detail. The allusion to Kudriáš’s song from the opera Kátí a Kabánová might very well be more profound than we imagine, and it is possible that the 3rd movement, or even the entire sonata, might have a script composed of unspoken words. Such an assumption is not too far fetched.

The 4th movement, Adagio: alongside a mature, sensitive and profound side, this movement reveals a vivid and original consciousness of modernity, though equally connected to the advances of the times, through sonic breezes reminiscent of Bartók and Scriabin.

Only now can we identify and truly understand the fact that the finale of the sonata closes an arch deliberately stretched over the entire work. That apparent conceptual discontinuity mentioned earlier regarding the passage between the other movements of the work disappears, and thus we discover the existence of a common ethos, whose expression is now utterly clear.

Janáček begins in G sharp minor, an enharmonic key to A flat minor, in which the 3rd movement ends. We notice again the enharmonic technique and, as in the 1st movement, a musical discourse governed by a subtle, even delicate classical sonata form, whose pattern is as follows:

- Exposition
  - theme 1 (mm. 1-14);
  - bridge (mm. 15-26);
  - theme 2 (mm. 27-34);
  - conclusion (mm. 35-39);
- Development (mm. 40-59);
- Recapitulation
  - theme 1 (mm. 60-68);
  - theme 2 (mm. 69-81);
  - coda (mm. 82-87).

The highly refined aspect of the formal construction lies in contrast, though not only in the contrast that naturally emerges between theme 2 and theme 1, but especially in the conflicts that theme 1 itself contains. Thus, theme 1 begins with a string of soft, tender chords, played dolce by the piano, to which the violin answers with sounds whose initial brutality (reminding of Bartók) quickly fades. We seem to hear the cimbalom again, with blows fuelled by an impotent fury (see the 4th movement, mm. 1-2). As usual, the Czech composer continues by repeating the motif twice, first through expansion (mm. 3-11), then (mm. 12-14) with slight changes in melody and harmony and in a constant 6/8 time. Played entirely by the piano, the bridge (mm. 15-26) consists of juxtapositions of sequences of a motif derived from theme 1. Almost unobtrusively, the musical discourse returns to a flat notation. We thus immediately understand why keeping the same key signature is justified.

Rendered in the key of E major – closely related to the G sharp minor from the beginning and the reason for keeping the key signature –, theme 2 is much shorter than we would expect (mm. 27-34). This does not prevent it from being expressive, warm, and full of passion, one of the most remarkable thematic constructions of the entire Sonata (see the 4th movement, mm. 27-34). The technique of motivic repetition is constantly used, with the violin material from the first four measures being taken over by the piano in the subsequent four measures, while the string instrument plays some chord arpeggios. The entire sound material reveals the most obvious tonal thinking in the whole work and has a vague touch of French music, which could make us think of Gabriel Fauré.

Musicology Papers 37, no. 2 (2022)
The conclusion (mm. 35-39) is an appendix of theme 2 and, in the last measure, recalls the brutal sonority of the violin’s first intervention.

In the 20 measures of the development (40-59), only one motif is treated sequentially, namely the motif from the first measure of theme 1. We hear musical strips torn from a whole and put back together in groups with a variable number of measures, in which Janáček creates a play of juxtapositions: sometimes the sequence starts on a new note, sometimes on the last note of the previous motif.

Ex. 9. Leoš Janáček, Sonata for violin and piano, play of juxtapositions (mm. 40-46).

We notice that the composer prefers to eliminate the key signature, but this does not in any way signal a modulation to C major or C minor, but rather the freedom of a tonal development unhindered by constitutive alterations, especially as the very rich agogic indication encourages performers to express their individuality more freely. And while in the first measures, the violin plays the fragment with small note values and a brutal expression, in the last five measures of the development it is its turn to take over the motif initially presented by the piano, with juxtapositions of sequences with and without intersection (see the 4th movement, mm. 55-59, violin only).

What we hear is subtly reminiscent of the atmosphere of the emotional turmoil of some piano pages by Aleksandr Skryabin, similar to the Two Poems Op. 44, written in 1905, and even more to the Two Poems Op. 71, written in 1914, the same year in which Janáček started work on his Sonata. The fragment we referred to above is also intended to prepare the final section of the sonata form, the recapitulation.

Compared to the exposition, theme 1 and the bridge in the recapitulation (mm. 60-81) undergo a process of reduction of the number of measures – theme 1 (mm. 60-63) and the bridge (mm. 64-68) –, whereas theme 2 (mm. 69-81) takes on a wider breath, as it also features a thematic development. The expansion and development of theme 2 counterbalance the shortening of theme 1 and the bridge, and thus a new balance emerges, which does not impoverish the music, but strips it down to its essence. The violin is the only carrier of the thematic and connecting message, whereas the piano serves to create the atmosphere of an explosion of tension, whose intensity gradually fades, to eventually reach a moment of silent suffering, of petrified pain. Thus can be understood the inversion of registers in theme 1, where the piano tremolos are placed far above the violin line, to which the composer imposes the use of the sombre, serious, severe 4th string. For the same purpose, the bridge leads the violin to the high register, preparing the beginning of theme 2 at the top of the third octave. But the zenith collapses into the abyss (see the 4th movement, mm. 69-81). We cannot help but notice how, once again, the last three measures return to the key of A flat minor, which dominates authoritatively all the movements of Leoš Janáček’s Sonata for violin and piano. During the performance, one has the distinct feeling that this could have been the final point of the work, especially if the performers choose to extend the quarter-note rest written

From the bridge.

Musicology Papers 37, no. 2 (2022)
by the composer with a fermata. But he wants it differently... As if from a distance in time and space, he brings back the first measures of the last movement, which he modifies only enough for them to stay in the key he pays tribute to, A flat minor. The impression the final sounds leave on the listener is overwhelming, and equally impressed is the one who has analysed the score.

Conclusions

Leoš Janáček’s *Sonata for violin and piano* JW VII/7 is one of his most beautiful, inspired and subtly constructed works. Apart from the allusions to the sounds of the cimbalom, which we can identify in a few fragments from the 1st, 3rd and 4th movements, the composer has neither the intention to amaze – through specially devised instrumental techniques – nor to innovate – through unprecedented compositional devices. On the contrary, in a work that he absolutely traditionally calls sonata, Janáček makes use of old and established techniques, methods and forms, to which he adds his own vision regarding the repeated and sequential motifs and the possible influence of speech melodies (*nápěvky mluvy*). Apart from being a hallmark of the composer, these last elements also reflect the Czech, or, rather, Moravian national specificity of the piece.

Even though the two performers do not have to face any difficulties related to melody, rhythm, dynamics, registers, tempos and construction of the musical material, they still have to face the ethos, the profound messages that the work contains and which they have first to decipher and then to convey to the audience. Without a thorough knowledge of the particularities of the Czech composer, the violinist and the pianist can fall into the trap set by a seemingly easy notation, and therefore their performance – in fact, a sonic rendering of some graphic signs – can only be inexpressive and banal.

Our analysis has emphasized the sensibility of many motifs and themes, doubled by the subtlety and diversity of meanings. This is perhaps also because Janáček’s *Sonata* is more of a chamber rhapsody, much different from other works with the same title. It is clear that its musical closeness to the folk genre of the ballad and to the art-music genre of the elegy – a riddle whose answer must be found and understood by performers and researchers alike – and the at times obvious and at others vague similarities with the speech melodies (*nápěvky mluvy*) are the best proof of modernity of a work in which the universal and the national character are masterfully intertwined.

An indisputable achievement of a free, ingenious and unconventional spirit, a sparkling gem of the chamber genre for an instrumental duo, Janáček’s *Sonata for violin and piano* tests the researcher’s reasoning, knowledge and insight, while offering performers the chance to display their profound artistic mastery and the joy of sharing with the public one of the most successful works for violin and piano of the 20th century.

Bibliography


