



Victorian
Opera



Cunning Little Vixen

Education Resource - Music/Drama/Theatre Studies

This resource is designed for use by teachers of drama, theatre studies and music and their students. However it is written to be of use by anyone interested in the opera. An introduction to opera, including a glossary of terms is available on the Victorian Opera website. There you can also listen to our podcast, The Art of Opera and watch videos produced by the company.

<http://www.victorianopera.com.au/education/learning-resources/>.

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1. Introduction

Cunning Little Vixen by Leoš Janáček is a comic opera with serious themes.

Written in 1922, *Cunning Little Vixen* is based on a series of drawings by Stanislav Lolek that were transformed into an illustrated serial and later turned into a novel by Rudolf Těsnohlídek. It explores the world of animals, human behaviour and the cycle of life.

Cunning Little Vixen is a synergy of art forms, using a blend of song, movement, acting and theatrical technologies to bring the story to life. Today it is recognised as a significant work from the 20th Century and is still performed regularly around the world. It was first performed in Australia in 1976 and has only been presented on a few occasions since, most recently in Sydney in 2011, and only once previously in Melbourne in 2004.

The version being presented by Victorian Opera features Jonathan Dove's 1998 chamber orchestra arrangement, with the English translation by Norman Tucker.

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2. Creative Team

Conductor Jack Symonds

Director Stuart Maunder AM

Costume Designer Roger Kirk

Set Designer Richard Roberts

Lighting Designer Trudy Dalglish

3. Characters and Cast

Character	Voice Type	Singer
Forester	Baritone	Barry Ryan
Forester's wife / Owl	Alto	Dimity Shepherd
School Master / Mosquito	Tenor	Brenton Spiteri
Parson / Badger	Bass	Jeremy Kleeman
Harašta, a poultry dealer	Bass	Samuel Dundas
Pásek	Chorus tenor	Paul Biencourt
Mrs Pásková / Lapak, a dog	Chorus soprano	Lynlee Williams
Pepik, the gamekeeper's grandson / Grasshopper	Children's voices - soprano	Hayley Edwards
Frantic, his friend / Young Frog	Children's voices - soprano	Lisha Ooi
Young Vixen Bystrouška	Child soprano	
Vixen Bystrouška	Soprano	Celeste Lazarenko
Tyrenka	Soprano	Danielle Calder
Fox	Soprano	Antoinette Halloran
Cock	Soprano	Alexandra Ioan
Cholcholka, a hen	Soprano	Cristina Russo
Woodpecker	Alto	Belinda Paterson
Jay	Soprano	Diana Simpson
Cricket	Children's voices - soprano	Sophia Wasley
Bee	Children's voices - soprano	Maia Hanrahan, Harmony Lee
Dragonfly	Children's voices - soprano	Eliza O'Connor
Caterpillar	Children's voices – soprano	Maggie Orr
Snail	Children's voices – soprano	Emilie Washington

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Character	Voice Type	Singer
Hens	Women's chorus	Kerrie Bolton, Danielle Calder, Belinda Paterson, Diana Simpson, Nicole Wallace
Forest creatures	Women's chorus	Kerrie Bolton, Danielle Calder, Alexandra, Ioan, Belinda Paterson, Cristina Russo, Diana Simpson, Lynlee Williams
Voice of the Forest	Mixed chorus	Paul Biencourt, Michael Lapina, Paul Hughes, Kiran Rajasingam
Fox cubs	Children's chorus	Hayley Edwards, Maia Hanrahan, Harmony Lee, Eliza O'Connor, Lisha Ooi, Maggie Orr, Emilie Washington, Sophia Wasley



Costume drawing by Roger Kirk

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4. Synopsis

The cartoons included in this synopsis are from “Vixen Fleetfoot” by Stanislav Lolek.

ACT I

During a summer’s afternoon in a forest, the insects, frogs and small animals are at play. A Forester, sleepy from the heat contemplates his life, his wife, and a past gypsy lover.



A young Vixen scares a Frog, who lands on the Forester’s nose. Waking, he grabs the Vixen and takes her home; a present for the children.



In the yard of the Forester’s home his Dog amorously engages the Vixen, with no success. The son and friend tease the Vixen and she bites them in retaliation. The Forester is forced by his unhappy wife to punish the Vixen and so he ties her up. That night the Vixen falls asleep and dreams of being a young girl. At dawn, the Cock starts bossing his hens. In disgust the Vixen challenges them to free themselves of his exploitation. She plays dead and when they come to look, she grabs the Cock and the hens and kills them all. When the Forester intervenes she manages to escape and returns to the forest.

ACT II

In the forest, the Vixen seeks a home and sets her sights on the Badger’s Den. She accuses him of impropriety and, insulted, he leaves. The Vixen claims his home as her own.



Late at night, at the village inn, the Forester, Parson and School Master are discussing the School Master’s old girlfriend Terynka and the Forester’s failure to domesticate the Vixen. The inebriated School Master heads home, soon followed by the others. In the forest he mistakes the brown eyes of the hidden Vixen for his beloved, Terynka. The Parson muses on the girl who betrayed him years ago. The Forester pursues the Vixen, firing indiscriminately.

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In the moonlit forest the Vixen meets a handsome Fox and they become enamoured with each other. They share their stories, declare their love and disappear into her den. Emerging the next morning they get married to avoid a scandal. The forest creatures celebrate their wedding.

ACT III

In the now autumnal forest, the poacher Harašta boasts that he is going to marry Terynka. He and the Forester have both spied a dead rabbit. Harašta, noticing the Forester, leaves it where it is. The Forester uses it to set a trap for the Vixen.



The Vixen's pups have come out to play, and the Vixen notices the trap. Seeing Harašta she lies in his path. Putting down his basket of chickens he picks up his gun and chases her as she flees, but falls flat on his face. The pups raid the basket. In fury at his broken nose and the Vixen, Harašta fires aimlessly; the Vixen is shot and left to die.

Back at the inn, the School Master discovers that Terynka is getting married that day, and will be wearing a new fox-skin muff. The Forester tells that he has found the Vixen's deserted den, pays his bill and heads home.



Feeling tired, the Forester admires the beauty of the forest around him. He recalls his youth and lies down to sleep. He dreams of the animals and reaches for the Vixen. He finds he has accidentally picked up a Frog and wakens. In fear, the Frog shouts it was his grandfather who used to talk about the Forester. The Forester smiles and returns to sleep, his gun placed carelessly at his side.

5. The Composer and Librettist: Leoš Janáček



Leoš Janáček

Janáček was born in Hukvaldy, Moravia in 1854 (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and died in Strava, Czechoslovakia in 1928. He was a choir boy in Brno, studied in Prague, Leipzig and Vienna, and lived and wrote in his home country for most of his life. He played piano and organ and taught music. He began composing in his mid-twenties, with works for the piano, violin and voice. In 1881 he founded an organ school in Brno which he directed for around 40 years. He conducted the Czech Philharmonic Society Orchestra for 7 years and also edited a music newspaper *Hudební listy*.

Janáček was particularly interested in folk music during the period of writing his first opera *Šárka* in the late 1880s and increasingly incorporated his research and the songs he discovered in his writing. From the 1890s he was particularly active in mainstream folkloric exploration, especially Moravian folk music. He wrote for voice (vocal and choral work and operas) and instruments (solo, chamber and orchestral work). He created “a highly personal melodic idiom based on rhythms and inflections of rural speech and song”. (Britannica) He also had a great interest in Russian culture, visiting Russia and using Russian literature as source material.

The opera *Jenůfa* was written during the illness of his daughter Olga, and upon her death it was dedicated to her. It received reasonable success after its world premiere in Brno in 1904. It was not until the 1916 Prague performances of *Jenůfa* that Janáček became recognised internationally.

An opera theatre and the Academy of Fine Arts (1947) in Brno are named in his honour. Festivals devoted to Janáček’s works are regularly held in Brno.

Janáček composed the music for nine operas, and for the final three also wrote the libretti. *Cunning Little Vixen* premiered at the National Theatre, Brno in 1924 and received its Italian premiere at La Scala, Milan in 1958. It is still being performed regularly around the world.

As an Eastern European composer, Janáček’s operatic work challenges the traditional Western understandings of theatre and theatrical interpretation. He is regarded as a significant and influential 20th Century composer.

6. Cunning Little Vixen: The Story

The illustrated serial, *Liška Bystrouška* was written by Rudolf Těsnohlídek (1882 – 1928) in 1920 as an assignment for the paper *Lidové noviny* and was published over three months. There were 51 instalments in the final serial. The idea came from 200 sketches by the painter Stanislav Lolek (1873 – 1936). Lolek, who had been an apprentice forester, created through his drawings the adventures of a clever vixen who repeatedly outsmarted a local forester.

Těsnohlídek achieved great success from the serial in his lifetime, and the short novel is still published today in Czechoslovakia. Těsnohlídek met with Janáček to discuss the composer's desire to create an opera derived from the story. Janáček proceeded to write the libretto. Těsnohlídek offered the text for a song of which Janáček used a few lines.

Janáček was very interested in nature and animals and the discovery of the Těsnohlídek serial coincided with his love for and study of birds, animals, mountains and forests. He had celebrated this interest in his writings in *Lidové noviny*. Janáček studied animals and their behaviour, and with the wealth of his experiences of love and life writing the opera was yet another way to share his love of nature and reflections on the journey of life.

The first act and a half of the opera follows Těsnohlídek's novel quite closely. However it diverges after that point. The end of the book is the close of the opera's second act and the final act of the opera comes in part from the middle sections of the book and in part from Janáček himself. He wanted to give the story a sad end, reflecting on his own stage of life.



Costume drawings by Roger Kirk

7. The Production: Stuart Maunder (Director)

What drew you to this particular opera? What does it offer you as a director?

I first experienced the piece in 1976, my first year of opera-going. That year I'd already seen *Carmen*, *Magic Flute*, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, *Rigoletto*, *Barber of Seville*, *Jenůfa*, *Rosenkavalier*, *Albert Herring* and *Marriage of Figaro*. *Vixen* was the last opera of the season and many friends had said it was 'difficult' music. Paying \$5 for a student rush ticket I had no idea what I was about to experience. I had adored the searing drama of *Jenůfa*, but this piece I found even more mesmerising... in the ideas, the audacity of mixing animal and human worlds without getting into bunny suits. The score was like nothing I had ever heard, not even *Jenůfa*... totally tuneful, complex and yet completely accessible for this operatic novice. Jonathan Miller's production was simple, direct and totally immersive. I went back to the next performance; I have longed to direct it from that point.

In purely practical terms it allows me the chance to produce something that has the power to make a new audience experience what I experienced all those years ago. It also gives me as a director exciting challenges to tackle. There's portraying animals and humans in the same world. There's also the piece's very loose, episodic and specific structure that is in no way linear, so for this director who is absolutely obsessed with logic, that is a massive challenge.

It is one of the great works. In the words of critic Steph Power writing about WNO's revival of the piece in 2013 the piece has a '*sheer uplifting generosityfrom a composer seemingly devoid of self-pity*'. The opera is tragic, charming, comic, tender and finally life-affirming, especially as it celebrates life in all its transience.

You have described this work as 'vivifying life's most profound and eternal truths'. What are the truths or themes included in this work, as you see them?

I reckon that eternal truths are so personal, it's something you can't help feeling. I find the Forester's realisation that he is part of a much bigger world, a much bigger universe, so moving. I can't explain it. We all matter, all contribute and all the petty troubles melt away. It's the power of the music, impossible to define and affects all of us completely differently. Very few pieces do it to me; the end of *William Tell*, *Tales of Hoffmann*, *Magic Flute*, *Figaro*, *Candide*...All express something that you can't straightjacket...you've experienced something through the show and yet the end just blows the walls off the theatre, takes you 'somewhere else' where you experience something you can't articulate.

The realisation is that we are all connected, all interdependent; man, earth, animals. Small as we are, we matter. We give to the next generation; we mould the thoughts of the next generation. Beauty is all around us, we just need to look. The opera is tragic, charming, comic, tender and finally life affirming, especially as it celebrates life in all its transience.

In your Director's statement you mention that the bond between man and nature is illuminated in this work. How has this awareness impacted on your vision for the production?

Ha! It's informed the whole design, thoughts and execution. Nature is hard to execute onstage, so we've made the most of the essentially unreal, heightened medium of theatre. We've blurred the lines, just as we believe Janáček does, so that these animals have human traits, the humans' animal traits. Time is also truncated. An animal's life span is obviously shorter than ours, so we're able to see life's full cycle experienced in a very short space of time. Even though there is a sense of nostalgia and regret in the human characters we are never allowed to dwell on that condition. Rather, like the sudden and shocking death of the Vixen we move on with a speed that only after the fact do we question. This is no death of Bambi's mother, affecting yes, and sentimental. This death is of a whole new order, necessary and welcome, even, as it leads to rebirth, renewal and a better understanding of our place in the natural order. The biggest emotional moment doesn't come at the death of the protagonist, but at the Forester's moment of realisation.

How would you describe the style or genre of the work?

I suppose 'folk opera'. It definitely has an accessible, peasant, 'folkloric' feel amongst the delicate, sophisticated writing. This is a piece that despite being complex, gives us the undeniable reality that it is easy to digest.

This work is particularly interesting in the manner of its anthropomorphic portrayal of the Vixen, and other creatures, in the story. How will you be directing the singers to play the animals in this production? Will you be asking for a specific contrast between the portrayal of the humans and the animals from the singers?

Much improvisation, experimentation and observation of the animals in question...there will be much googling of David Attenborough. We will try to reduce to the recognisable essence of the animal, and the human. The singers shouldn't slavishly try to copy animals, rather should be given license to make the animals human.

Many of the characters are being portrayed by female voices (both male and female characters), are there specific qualities you need to look for in the performers of these roles?

No, as with operas in which a female plays an adolescent boy the sound is all important. Janáček was obsessed with recreating speech rhythms and the correct relationship of sounds. We alter that at our peril. The adult animals, with the exception of the curmudgeonly old Badger, are all mature female voices...all in the same aural world. The children are all trebles, be they female or male. The humans are the 'correct' sexes. It adds to the complexity of the night, and the delineation of the animal and human world.

Considering that there are some younger, less experienced performers in this production, what, if any theatrical techniques will you give the singers on how to ‘act’ to assist them in this work? Is there time in the rehearsal process for acting instruction to be shared with the performers?

Observation, improvisation, games. There is indeed time to instruct, but it will be more about harnessing an energy, a childlike wonder and naivety... and teaching them to learn how to ‘save’, in a computing sense... to be able to repeat the feeling, the idea.

As you mentioned, the majesty, grandeur and emotion of this work is contained in the music, but I imagine it will be equally expressed in the action on stage. In your role as director, how are you intending to express this amazing music visually, through the performances and your vision?

By every theatrical trick I know! Lighting is extremely important, to subliminally focus our thoughts to swell, to constrict the view, to expand the view. The surfaces of the design are primarily to take light. We can, in no way match the music...we can point, underline, focus but we can’t ‘match’ the grandeur etc. and we can only give it a platform to work its power.

What is the role of Janáček’s music in facilitating the creation of the characters in this work?

Janáček’s music is the creation of the characters. I can hone, massage, interpret...but the feel of the characters is expressed in the music...the sadness of the School Master, the world-weariness of the Forester, the sly Poacher, the screechy Forester’s wife/Owl, the smooth, ‘in love with love’ Fox, and most tellingly the irresistible, naughty, romantic, and of course cunning Vixen. No matter what I do, the ‘sound’ of those characters will dominate. That’s Janáček’s great achievement in this piece. He is the architect of the emotion of the piece.

How do you see the relationship between the on-stage performers and the audience in this production?

I love the Playhouse because it forces the performers and the audience into a close relationship. Its intimacy means there is no sitting back and observing as if on television. It is close, upfront and very personal. There is nowhere to hide. It only works in the theatre, to experience it in the theatre is essential.

There is movement/dance included in this production, how will this be included? How do you see this adding to the storytelling?

There is certainly movement, but not balletic movement. Choreographed everyday movement with recognisable animal traits, a caterpillar very different to the fox! Repetition. There will be folk dance style, especially in the wedding scene. There will be many children playing games, energy and fun. And an awful lot of it based on my cat, Kaspar.

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Costume drawings by Roger Kirk

8. The Design: Richard Roberts (Set Design)

Richard Roberts has designed 161 shows, for companies like the South Australian Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, Opera Australia and many others. He is also renowned as a teacher of design.

What was your knowledge of this work prior to accepting the gig?

I'd never seen it, but I'd heard of it and heard bits of it because I have spent quite a bit of time in the Czech Republic, attending four Prague Quadrennials. I made friends there and Janáček is like the god of Czech music so I'd been exposed to it.

What is your process as a designer? How do you access the work?

You can't start without a conversation with the director. You can familiarise yourself with the work and do the background reading but you need to talk with the director. A good director isn't going to dictate the design, that's what he wants you to do, but it's the director who gives the triggers to set you off in a direction. It's a dialogue between a number of collaborators and each one of us has influence in the direction it goes, the director and the rest of the creative team. Ultimately the director is the arbiter of the ideas.

The dialogue between Stuart, Roger, Trudy and I [the creative team] is crucial. Fortunately we have worked together before (*Pirates of Penzance* and *My Fair Lady* for OA) and work well.

What is it about this show that has excited you?

To me the most important thing is who I will be working with. The connection with the people is a huge motivator. Stuart gives a lot of room, a lot of territory. Early on it was a bit difficult, we were having to communicate by email or phone, and I wanted to see if Roger had any drawings to get a line on it. But then Stuart talked about the final moment of the piece, it was at that moment he wanted something really special and that set me off.

Stuart talked about the element of nature in the work, so I had this idea of a leaf, and that the veins of a leaf look like a tree. The design has become very graphic, like a large illustration. I have created tree structures which Trudy will be able to light. You get to see all the seasons in this opera, so there is the notion of the colours of the seasons. Stuart sees the worlds of the opera separating by colour. The world of the humans is monochrome and the world of the animals is coloured.

We have created a convention for the worlds and understanding the convention is crucial to the design and the many questions we will get asked as we go into the rehearsal and production process - how the world folds and what can fly in and out and so forth. We need to intimately understand all the intricacies of the convention we have created.

How would you describe the style of your design?

It is graphic in style with a strong two dimensional quality to it. It can be easily flattened out. Stuart wanted it to have little surprises in it and a witty and humorous quality to it, which Roger has also incorporated.

As designer, what is your role in engaging with the story, the characters in the work?

The designer has an intimate engagement with the story, but it is largely about the transitions. We have the scene in the forest and then the next scene is in the Forester's yard. How do we get from one to the other? It's the in-between. I'm designing a machine, a giant mechanism for delivering the opera. I will often write a storyboard that has images of the set model and a list of instructions. I liken it to a driver's manual for a new car. The storyboard is the manual to drive the set.

How does the design influence the relationship between the performer and the audience?

The designer can have a huge influence. If the designer gets in the way between the performer and the audience, they've failed. The designer's job is to support the performer, my job is to enhance the performer/audience relationship.

What do you want the audience to experience, feel and think when they see your set?

In some ways you don't want the set to make sense until the show begins. It's not a giant installation that makes sense on its own. It can be beautiful or interesting but a performer needs to be in it for it to make sense.

What is it about the set that you particularly like?

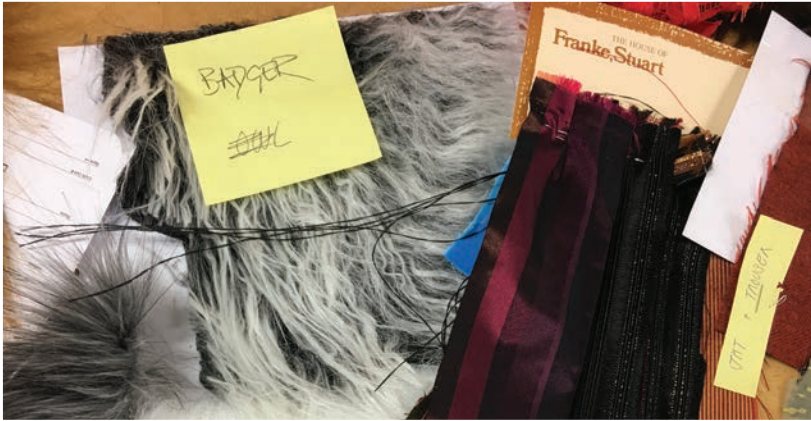
That nothing is superfluous. My design style is pared back. I like to think that it is all crucial. The set is a complete entity in itself.

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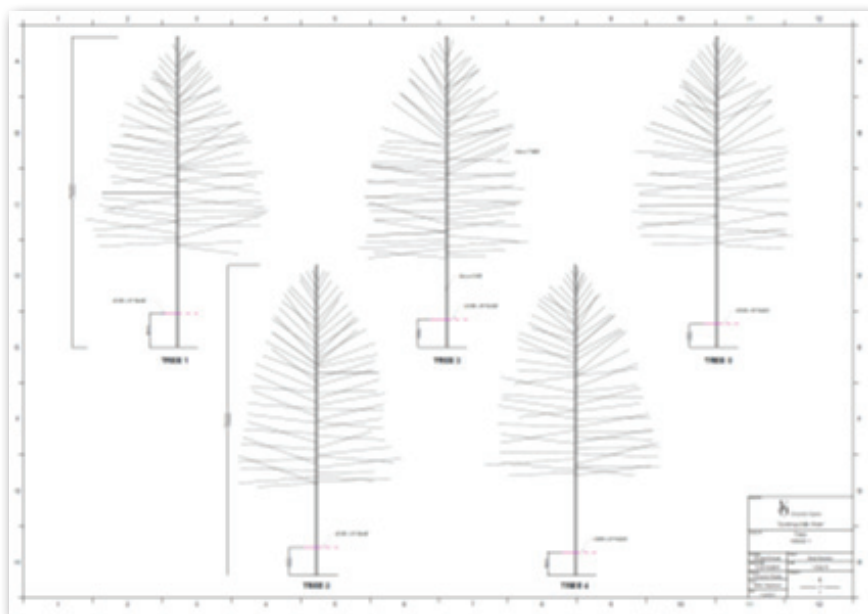
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The Costume Department at Victorian Opera preparing for *Cunning Little Vixen*
Pictured: Narelle Wilson - Cutter



Set drawing by Richard Roberts

9. The Music: Jack Symonds (Conductor)

The following is a reduction of the responses received. The full transcript is available at the end of the document as an appendix.

What is it about this work that excites you as the conductor?

Personally, I find the challenge of realising Janáček's very original concept of what operatic music could be extremely satisfying. His unique musical language requires a total immersion in his style from all the musicians, and turning up every day to chip away at perfecting that style is both exciting and rewarding. I see this piece as a key part of the twentieth century's operatic history and development. Its enduring appeal surely stems from the fresh and rich musical language coupled with Janáček's unerring dramatic instincts by this late stage in his career.

How would you describe this work?

For me, *Vixen* is simultaneously a coming-of-age pastoral, a set of wildly contrasting cartoon-like vignettes and a profound meditation on the cycles of life and nature. Janáček achieves this multilayered stage work seemingly effortlessly by throwing together a large and colourful cast of characters and focussing intensely on them at various stages of life and understanding.

The opera moves fast, and virtuosically juggles its many worlds in about ninety minutes. Janáček found a unique style of libretto writing and composition that stitches together many small scenes that add up to far more than the sum of their parts. There is also a very large role played by the orchestra in creating the varied scenes of the piece.

What are the strengths of Janáček's composition in *Cunning Little Vixen*?

Janáček had a unique method of composition in his final decade. It [*Cunning Little Vixen*] is extremely immediate and visceral in impact, due to the pungency of the rhythmic language which derives- we are told- from the natural inflections and rhythms of Czech speech.

Moulding vocal works directly out of speech seemed to grant Janáček the freedom to unmoor himself from traditional ways of creating long-form structure and harmonic rhythm, basking in the glorious irrationality of the resultant music. By rights, the form of this work should be utterly ramshackle, composed as it is of miniatures and vignettes. It is some kind of miracle that it holds together in so original a fashion, and that is largely down to Janáček's intuitive sense of timing, drama and large-scale form.

The work is being presented in English, will this have any particular impact on how you work with the singers?

Performing in English means the singers can give the text directly to the audience, as actors would. This is a great help to the dramatic flow of a work where very little backstory, explanation or elaboration is present in the text. There are a few compromises necessary to make the English intelligible with Janáček's precise rhythms, but by and large my work with the singers is about clarifying the intention of the musical line with the text. This would be the same in any language, but English is such an awkward language to sing (particularly

at the speed Janáček demands) so it is certainly a challenge to maintain the integrity of the composition's abstract network of tempi and harmonic rhythm while being flexible enough to communicate the specific story to the audience in English. It is a balance that only comes with time; getting the piece inside the singers' bodies so it can be transmitted to the audience without the barrier of technical or linguistic concerns.



Cover of the score

What musical traditions do you think Janáček drew on for this composition?

It is extremely unusual to find a major composer discover their 'voice' so late in life and for that voice to be so unique and only tangentially related to other traditions. Janáček was over 45 when he finished his first composition of substance- the opera *Jenůfa*- and astonishingly, well into his 60s before it could be said that he truly crystallised the style that defined his work. As such, he stands intriguingly outside the traditions that should have influenced his work.

In *Vixen*, there are seemingly inexhaustible changes rung out of the whole-tone scale dissolving into ambiguous 9th chords he presumably heard in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The rhythmic language of cross-cutting material in wildly different tempi and expression is probably inconceivable without at least knowledge of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, to say nothing of *The Rite*

of Spring. However, I would strongly argue that Janáček's music sounds and behaves like no other composer, as far as the imprint of tradition.

The harmony uses an enormously wide vocabulary from the simplest drone harmonisations of (invented) folk-song which Smetana may have recognised, tonal chromaticism worthy of Mahler and early Schoenberg, suspended modality seemingly straight out of Debussy and a joy in biting bitonality redolent of this era when Bartók and Stravinsky came of age. None of it is a second-pressing of any of these composers; it is filtered with extraordinary discernment through Janáček's own conception of melody, rhythm and dramatic structure.

The form of these late operas is also similarly unique. Perhaps the only possible precedent could be the elusive, radiant blocks of sound in *Pelléas* combined with the rawness of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. The dreamlike way the final 20 minutes of the opera unfold from the *Vixen*'s death to the Young Frog's reappearance is practically inconceivable without *Pelléas*. That the sound worlds of the two operas are unrecognisable from each other is a credit to Janáček's idiosyncratic absorption and skilful reimagining of the tenets of Debussy's only opera.

How would you describe this work in terms of its compositional style? Are the instrumentation, voices, tone colour, texture, melodies, harmony and compositional devices typical of this type of opera?

Janáček creates his own 'typical' type of opera - there is no real prototype. Janáček's orchestration is deceptively colourful; he uses the fewest instruments necessary to create an effect, like Ravel. Janáček typically pushes the upper strings and winds to the top of their registers in fast ostinati and leaves the harmony to much lower instruments spaced very closely. The resultant 'gap' is where the singers can be clearly heard.

For the vast majority of the opera, melodies simply unfold over ostinati which 'spell out' their own harmonic function. Melodic lines are occasionally superimposed, but this creates a kind of 'polyphonic simultaneity' rather than learned counterpoint, *chez-Meistersinger*.

The melodies are essentially short-breathed vocal declamations which expand into instrumental ostinati to generate a whole scene or section of a scene. The orchestra acts as an observer and extender of these melodies. There are striking exceptions, where it is clear Janáček had a melodic impulse before the speech rhythm, and special mentions must be made of the 'dream' interlude in Act I, Vixen's lyrical solo in her Act II love scene, and the gracefully arching melody in Act III which occurs at three important points: when Vixen wistfully sings of how many children she may have in the future, as a pained elegy for her death and as the final, radiant apotheosis illustrating the continuity of life. These moments are thrown into sharper relief by the speech-like ostinato style of the rest of the melodic lines in the piece.

Janáček also frequently leaves the bass notes of the chord just to the timpani and trombone (rather than strings and woodwinds), generating instability of harmony and a very unusual colour. There are vestiges of late-Romantic orchestration too: big, lyrical solos for oboe, cor anglais and clarinet, bird and insect imitations from flute and violins and the glitter of celesta - cosmetically applied with extreme tastefulness. Instruments are used mostly in primary colours, immediately associative with events on stage. The wind writing in particular is pert and demands vigorous, rather than traditionally-blended playing.

Harmony, as described above, is wide open to different methods of assembling notes vertically. The predominant tone of the work is of a gloriously 'non-functioning' tonality. Tonal triads are unmoored from their function in a hierarchical tonic-dominant system and are used essentially as modes and mode mixtures to explore the range of colours contained in familiar sounds.

Rhythm is used in an absolutely unique and extraordinary way. Because of the predominance of ostinati, Janáček is able to build paragraphs out of 'daisy-chains' of related but very different rhythmic ostinati. He does this by metric modulation. The gleeful irrationality arises when Janáček does not use metric modulation, and suddenly cross-cuts into a new idea with no transition. In fact, this is music with no transitions at all: each idea is presented as if freshly formed, then dissolves into the next without delay. This is truly original - I can't think of another opera before Janáček's where the function of the instrumental interludes isn't to transition one musical idea into the next, but to represent entire ideas in themselves and create a series of immediate musical pictures.

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Costume drawings by Roger Kirk

10. Education Activities

Pre-visit Exploration

The activities below are designed for use in Drama, Theatre Studies and Music from the Victorian secondary school curriculum.

Research

1. **(Theatre Studies)** Research the designs of other productions of *Cunning Little Vixen*

- Look at images of productions of the opera online
- Compare them to the Victorian Opera design choices included in this resource

2. **(Drama/Theatre Studies)** Research other productions in which animals are played by humans. What choices would you make as a director to have actors play animals and not look like clichés or stereotypes? For example;

- In the musical *Cats*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, all the characters are cats. How were the singers portrayed as cats in the production? Do you think this costume, makeup and design choice was successful? Why?
- In non-Western opera, non-human characters are often portrayed with masks. What effect do you observe masks having to support the portrayal of animal characters?

Listen/Watch

1. **(Music)** Listen to the following version of *Cunning Little Vixen* on YouTube. This recording is in the original language, Czech. Victorian Opera's production will be performed in English. Note the magnificent manner in which Janáček used the rhythms of the Czech language in the music. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQhLyG3_HnQ

2. **(Drama, Music)** Watch the following snippets of *Cunning Little Vixen*. What do they reveal to you about the opera, Janáček's intention and the differences in interpretation?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQvLOfbvRwE> - Glyndebourne Festival Opera, June 2012, end of Act I

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMZ-W0HemW8> - Bergen National Opera in March 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isqERHfTrUc> - Bergen National Opera in March 2013 from Act 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYy9TAFmOhE> - Teatro Comunale, Florence, 2009 – from Act 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vv9LSiNiLtA> – Act 3 finale

3. **(Music)** Janáček was very interested in national folk music, in particular the music of Czechoslovakia. Listen to these recordings. How do you think this might have influenced the music in Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdHe6uiuoxU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3mSdcaeAuQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-i5Otw6Ri0>

This opera appears as a series of vignettes bridged by evocative musical scene changes. You can listen to them via the following video -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQhLyG3_HnQ

Two examples can be heard at 31.55minutes and 39.30minutes.

- What are the moods created by these scene changes?
- How is the mood created in the music?

4. Watch the animated version of *Cunning Little Vixen* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-GbR1bz3Cw>

Discuss

1. **(Drama/Music)** Stuart Maunder (Director) describes briefly the impact this opera had on him the first time he saw it.

- Discuss productions or pieces of music that had a profound impact on you the first time you saw/heard them
- Discuss why music or shows might have specific impacts? In which circumstances might this happen for an audience member?

2. **(Drama/Music)** None of us are islands. All of us are impacted by other works, stories and experiences. When we write music or write stories, we might not recognise that we are using those influences in our own work.

- What other works do you think are influencing or affecting the way you write?
- Think about shows or music that you really like. Can you hear influences of other productions or music in them?

3. (Drama/Music) Listen to the following scene at the inn, where the characters of the Parson, Forester and the School Master are playing cards and talking about their lives.

- Listen to the 'dialogue'. It can be heard in this recording https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQhLyG3_HnQ . It can be heard at 33.32 minutes. In opera, recitative is dialogue which is sung over a simple harmonic structure. In this section the dialogue is similar to recitative in sound, but the orchestra is fully scored with its own melodies.
- How does this impact on the characterisation and the creation of character to be performing the 'dialogue' in this way?
- Here is the text from the beginning of the scene. How does the sound of the Czech language affect the feeling, mood and sense of character for you?

FARÁŘ Ano, ve Stráni bude daleko lépe!

REVÍRNÍK Ój, důstojné! Ó, důstojné, budeme mít slavné oddavky. Myslím, že si rechtořisko nějaká osedlala.

FARÁŘ Non des mulieri corpus tuum!

REVÍRNÍK Ty poťochlenče, řekni, máš-li jakou! Však já to z tebe dostanu. Bývalo, bývalo, dávno už není, tobě jen, Verunko, chtělo se bdění, na světě tratí se všechno a mění, modřín se zelenal, květen byl kdysi, Verunka zestárla, modřín je lysý. Kterak jí nyní as po létech říká?

- Listen for the musical intervals between the highest and lowest notes that the characters sing? Does this range sound like melody or sung speech? Why?

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Learn

1. **(Music)** Below is the melody form the Chorus in the Wedding Dance at the end of Act II

- Listen to the recording here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQhLyG3_HnQ The Wedding Dance enters at 105:36 minutes
- Learn and sing the melody.

Wedding Dance - Ballet Cunning Little Vixen

Allegro

Chorus

(d=d) *Alto*

Bass

Chorus

S

T

A

B

Chorus

Audience

During your visit

1. Observe the theatre and the audience. What do you notice about the style of the theatre? How would you describe the Playhouse? What do you notice about the audience for this type of opera? Was it the audience you expected? How do they respond to the opera?
2. Observe the stagecraft elements of the production. What are the elements you notice most? What did you notice about the lighting design?
3. How well does the orchestra balance with the singers? What effect does the instrumentation have on you and your reaction/connection with the story?
4. What do you enjoy most about the entire experience?
5. Do the surtitles (projected words) effect your experience?

Post-show reflection

1. What did the critics say? Look up reviews of the opera and see how they compare with your interpretation. Write a review of the opera for your school newsletter.
2. Did you enjoy the opera? Why? What appealed to you? Be clear about the different elements in your reflection – singing, orchestration, set, costume, movement, lighting etc.
3. What was it about the set/costumes/lighting that enhanced your experience of the opera?
4. Which character(s) impacted on you most? What was it about this (these) character(s) that you connected with?
5. Discuss with other class members how you saw and responded to the production differently.

12. Credits



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Victorian Opera website <<http://www.victorianopera.com.au/>>

13. Appendix

Questions for Jack Symonds – Conductor

This is a full transcript of Jack Symond's responses.

What is about this work that excites you as the Musical Director?

Personally, I find the challenge of realising Janáček's very original concept of what operatic music could be extremely satisfying. His unique musical language requires a total immersion in his style from all the musicians, and turning up every day to chip away at perfecting that style is both exciting and rewarding. I see this piece as a key part of the twentieth century's operatic history and development. Its enduring appeal surely stems from the fresh and rich musical language coupled with Janáček's unerring dramatic instincts by this late stage in his career.

Why have you chosen to be involved with this production?

I am an admirer of Victorian Opera's work, and this seems a natural piece where my particular tastes and skills cross over with VO's repertoire. I only work on pieces and productions I really believe in- as making an opera is months of work I wouldn't want to have it any other way. The quality of the creative team and cast was, naturally, a further enticement. I am also drawn to Jonathan Dove's economical and revelatory chamber version of this piece. Making it into a chamber opera (without losing any music, singers or parts of course) zeroes in on the lithe modernism of the score and allows the musicians greater flexibility and opportunity to be soloists in Janáček's virtuosic wind and string writing.

How would you describe this work?

For me, Vixen is simultaneously a coming-of-age pastoral, a set of wildly contrasting cartoon-like vignettes and a profound meditation on the cycles of life and nature. Janáček achieves this multilayered stage work seemingly effortlessly by throwing together a large and colourful cast of characters and focussing intensely on them at various stages of life and understanding. Its three acts span the titular Vixen's life from her youth and being captured in the forest, to her rebellious adolescence, falling in love, having children and death. This particular cycle is contrasted with the human characters of the Gamekeeper, Schoolmaster and Priest who we first meet in their middle age and who grow older, sadder and wistful about the passing of time. The transcendent transfiguration that occurs at the end of the opera as the Gamekeeper draws together his whole life in a pantheistic hymn to nature and love shows us Janáček's understanding of this final cycle- nature's eternal renewal. The reappearance of the Young Frog in the final moments of the opera is a masterstroke that, in about 30 seconds, for me illuminates the whole concept and meaning of the piece.

The opera moves fast, and virtuosically juggles its many worlds in about ninety minutes. By this stage, Janáček had found a unique style of libretto writing and composition that stitches together many small scenes that add up to far more than the sum of their parts. There is also a very large role played by the orchestra in creating the varied scenes of the piece, and a great opportunity for dance, costume and a wide range of staging techniques.

What are the strengths of Janáček's composition in CLV?

Janáček had a unique method of composition in his final decade, roughly from the composition of *The Diary of One Who Disappeared* (1917- 1919) to his final opera *From the House of the Dead* (1927-1928). The majority of the pieces are vocal (with the outstanding exceptions of the two string quartets, two piano chamber concertos, *Mládí* and *Sinfonietta*) and there are, amazingly, four operas. Vixen is the second of this final quartet of operas, and picks up where *Katya Kabanova* left off. It is extremely immediate and visceral in impact, due to the pungency of the rhythmic language which derives- we are told- from the natural inflections and rhythms of Czech speech.

Moulding vocal works directly out of speech seemed to grant Janáček the freedom to unmoor himself from traditional ways of creating long-form structure and harmonic rhythm, basking in the glorious irrationality of the resultant music.

By rights, the form of this work should be utterly ramshackle, composed as it is of miniatures and vignettes. It is some kind of miracle that it holds together in so original a fashion, and that is largely down to Janáček's intuitive sense of timing, drama and large-scale form.

The work is being presented in English, will this have any particular impact on how you work with the singers?

Performing in English means the singers can give the text directly to the audience, as actors would. This is a great help to the dramatic flow of a work where very little backstory, explanation or elaboration is present in the text. It is extremely concise in this way. There are a few compromises necessary to make the English intelligible with Janáček's precise rhythms, but by and large my work with the singers is about clarifying the intention of the musical line with the text. This would be the same in

any language, but English is such an awkward language to sing (particularly at the speed Janáček demands) so it is certainly a challenge to maintain the integrity of the composition's abstract network of tempi and harmonic rhythm while being flexible enough to communicate the specific story to the audience in English. It is a balance that only comes with time; getting the piece inside the singers' bodies so it can be transmitted to the audience without the barrier of technical or linguistic concerns.

What musical traditions do you think Janáček's drew on for this composition?

It is extremely unusual to find a major composer discover their 'voice' so late in life- and for that voice to be so unique and only tangentially related to other traditions. Wagner and Elgar certainly took a long time to write music of originality that matched their ambitions (and were certainly worth the wait!) Elliott Carter took until his early 40s to find himself in the Arizona desert, but Janáček was over 45 when he finished his first composition of substance- the opera *Jenůfa*- and astonishingly, well into his 60s before it could be said that he truly crystallised the style that defined his work. As such, he stands intriguingly outside the traditions that should have influenced his work. He was born only 13 years after Dvořák, and was a mature musician by the time Smetana had died. One might assume by his dates (1854- 1928) that he would have been a Nationalist, late-Romantic, Moravian 'Dvořák-manqué' imbued with Czech dance and song, creating folk operas and rustic tone poems. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The extreme delay in his production and discovery of his voice meant that, although suckled on Dvořák and Smetana (and their indefinable 'Czechness' somehow never left him), he came of age compositionally in the thrillingly shifting musical sands of the early twentieth century. Debussy had just died when Janáček began his final decade of masterpieces, and Schoenberg was poised on the brink of unveiling dodecaphony to the world. Bartok had begun documenting the authentic folk traditions of his surrounding countryside with recording technology, and Stravinsky had atomised rhythm.

All of this rush of musical development finds its way into Janáček's late work, as well as the Puccinian kiss of plush melody Janáček so admired in *Madama Butterfly*. In *Vixen*, there are seemingly inexhaustible changes rung out of the whole-tone scale dissolving into ambiguous 9th chords he presumably heard in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The rhythmic language of cross-cutting material in wildly different tempi and expression is probably inconceivable without at least *Petrushka*, to say nothing of the *Rite*. However, I would strongly argue that Janáček's music sounds and behaves like no other composer, as far as the imprint of tradition. The through-line of incisive speech rhythm and melody means that even at its most lyrical (especially in the *Vixen*'s love scene in Act II and her reflections on motherhood in Act III), it never veers into Puccinian decadence. The harmony uses an enormously wide vocabulary from the simplest drone harmonisations of (invented) folk-song which Smetana may have recognised, tonal chromaticism worthy of Mahler and early Schoenberg, suspended modality seemingly straight out of Debussy and a joy in biting bitonality redolent of this era when Bartok and Stravinsky came of age. None of it is second-pressing of any of these composers; it is filtered with extraordinary discernment through Janáček's own conception of melody, rhythm and dramatic structure.

The form of these late operas is also similarly unique. Perhaps the only possible precedent could be the elusive, radiant blocks of sound in *Pelléas* combined with the rawness of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. (I would add *Khovanshchina*, but it would have been practically impossible for Janáček to know that work). Debussy's extraordinary achievement in *Pelléas* was to loosen the Wagnerian idea of symphonic operatic development, without recourse to crude, Italianate thinly-veiled recitative-aria-chorus writing of *verisimo*, while still maintaining fluency and clarity of dramatic form. Janáček's method was to 'show the joins' of his dramatic forms with sudden shifts, yet cycle through his ideas like a kaleidoscope. The dreamlike way the final 20 minutes of the opera unfold from the *Vixen*'s death to the Young Frog's reappearance is practically inconceivable without *Pelléas*. Two substantial symphonic interludes meditate freely on ideas to come and ideas just heard, while the voices declaim increasingly lyrically against this apparently inevitable wash of sound.

That the sound worlds of the two operas are unrecognisable from each other is a credit to Janáček's idiosyncratic absorption and skilful reimagining of the tenets of Debussy's only opera.

How would you describe this work in terms of its compositional style? Are the instrumentation, voices, tone colour, texture, melodies, harmony and compositional devices typical of this type of music theatre?

Janáček creates his own 'typical' type of music theatre- there is no real prototype. To speak to the instrumentation- although this is an arrangement, it maintains Janáček's very idiosyncratic method of using instruments to space chords. Janáček's orchestration is deceptively colourful; he uses the fewest instruments necessary to create an effect, like Ravel. Drawing his staves freehand so there were no wasted notes or impetus to fill up a blank page of manuscript meant that there are very often fascinating 'holes' in the texture, usually in the middle register. This becomes far more extreme in the following two operas (*Vec Makropulos* and *From the House of the Dead*) but the seeds are present in *Vixen*. Janáček typically pushes the upper strings and winds to the top of their registers in fast ostinati and leaves the harmony to much lower instruments spaced very closely. The resultant 'gap' is where the singers can be clearly heard. This can take some getting used to for singers

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accustomed to constant instrumental doubling in their register and tonal chords spaced 'correctly' in the functional tonal fashion.

The textures are most frequently homophonic as there is no counterpoint in the Austro-Germanic sense. For the vast majority of the opera, melodies simply unfold over ostinati which 'spell out' their own harmonic function. Melodic lines are occasionally superimposed, but this creates a kind of 'polyphonic simultaneity' rather than learned counterpoint, *chez-Meistersinger*.

The melodies are essentially short-breathed vocal declamations which expand into instrumental ostinati to generate a whole scene or section of a scene. The orchestra acts as an observer and extender of these melodies, in total contrast to the function of the Wagnerian orchestra as generator of musical content. There are striking exceptions, where it is clear Janáček had a melodic impulse before the speech rhythm, and special mentions must be made of the 'dream' interlude in Act I, Vixen's lyrical solo in her Act II love scene, and the gracefully arching melody in Act III which occurs at three important points: when Vixen wistfully sings of how many children she may have in the future, as a pained elegy for her death and as the final, radiant apotheosis illustrating the continuity of life. These moments are thrown into sharper relief by the speech-like ostinato style of the rest of the melodic lines in the piece.

Janáček also frequently leaves the bass notes of the chord just to the timpani and trombone (rather than strings and woodwinds), generating instability of harmony and a very unusual colour. There are vestiges of late-Romantic orchestration too: big, lyrical solos for oboe, cor anglais and clarinet, bird and insect imitations from flute and violins and the glitter of celesta- cosmetically applied with extreme tastefulness. There are no half-lit Parsifal-ian echoes such as can be found in *Pelléas*. Instruments are used mostly in primary colours, immediately associative with events on stage. The wind writing in particular is pert and demands vigorous, rather than traditionally-blended playing.

Harmony, as described above, is wide open to different methods of assembling notes vertically. The predominant tone of the work is of a gloriously 'non functioning' tonality. Tonal triads are unmoored from their function in a hierarchical tonic-dominant system and are used essentially as modes and mode mixtures to explore the range of colours contained in familiar sounds. Janáček is supremely aware of the emotional affect of various tonal 7ths, 9ths, 11ths and every suspension known to the era, and uses them at precisely the right time in the drama to exploit their well-worn powers of emotional engagement. In particular, the half-diminished 7th, with which Wagner so skilfully showed an array of harmonic functions, is shorn off from tonal theory and presented as a sound-object in its own right. (Puccini also titillatingly dipped his toes into this idea in the Act I love scene of *La bohème*). Yes, there are maddening times when you wish Janáček had never discovered the whole tone scale! But just at the moment of saturation he creates a harmonic coup and an unexpected resolution that fully justifies the weight and balance of harmonic rhythm. These are often achieved by a unique kind of parallelism that seems the next logical step from Debussy: chains of 4ths coincidentally similar to what Hindemith was achieving at the same time (which there is no record of Janáček having heard).

Rhythm is used in an absolutely unique and extraordinary way. Because of the predominance of ostinati, Janáček is able to build paragraphs out of 'daisy-chains' of related but very different rhythmic ostinati. He does this by metric modulation, to a degree arguably not matched by any composer in the first half of the twentieth century, and not more sophisticatedly until Elliott Carter's first string quartet. Early interpreters of Janáček ignored his (rather complex) metric modulations, focussing instead on creating a patchwork of unrelated sections each with their own individual rhythm. This simply will not do- these metric modulations (particularly in Act I) are what bind together the form and melodic shapes, as well as creating correspondences between motifs. The gleeful irrationality arises when Janáček does not use metric modulation, and suddenly cross-cuts into a new idea with no transition. In fact, this is music with no transitions at all: each idea is presented as if freshly formed, then dissolves into the next without delay. If Wagner's music may be said to be in a constant (unmatchable) state of transition then Janáček is his antithesis. This is truly original- I can't think of another opera before Janáček where the function of the instrumental interludes isn't to transition one musical idea into the next, but to represent entire ideas in themselves and create a series of immediate musical pictures.

Having been the MD on the Sydney Chamber Opera's production, how are you going to be interpreting the work this time?

I think my interpretation is roughly the same, in as much as I am trying as far as humanly possible to respect Janáček's overarching form by focussing on the rhythmic detail on a micro and macro level and emphasise his totally unique kind of harmonic spacing. I think this time now that I have done the chamber arrangement once, it is more familiar to me and I won't be imagining the full version in my head. This means it can be an autonomous work and not a compromise from the full orchestral score. In both productions the singers were performing the roles for the first time so it's great to be discovering it with them fresh rather than unravelling layers of accrued habits.