PHILHARMONIC: JANACEK

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"THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD," Leos Janacek's last opera, is a timely and timeless work that sounds in many ways as if it were written last week. Composed in 1928 three months before the Czech composer's death at age 75, this grimly powerful opera is based on Dostoyevsky's autobiographical novel describing life in the Russian gulag, mid-19th-century version. Janacek's original score had its first complete United States performance last night in a concert version by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of his fellow countryman Rafael Kubelik.

It was clear that Mr. Kubelik believed in this work's dramatic as well as purely musical strengths. To match the prevailing darkness of the opera, he had all his forces dressed in black, including the Philharmonic musicians. Twenty vocal soloists and a male chorus were on a raised platform behind the orchestra, which gave a distant and unreal air to the proceedings. At the opera's final despairing chord, the lights of Avery Fisher Hall went out.

Along with much gripping music, the work has a relentlessly bleak vocal line that in this unstaged version did not always hold the interest, particularly in what should have been the final act's melodramatic denouement. The English translation, although generally sensitive to the composer's eccentric requirements as to accent and inflection, could not consistently penetrate Janacek's muscular and angular orchestral music. Luckily, the Philharmonic provided a free libretto, which rates a salute.

The convicts - notably John Cheek, Richard Cassilly, Donald Grobe and Norman Mittelmann - ranted, babbled, bragged and otherwise carried on in the half-deranged manner of pent-up men. All had to force their speech-song to be heard, but often the dramatic impact was strong, nonetheless. This is not a work that calls for much vocal suavity and none was offered. Janacek's three-act work, presented in an authentic version that Mr. Kubelik was largely responsible for bringing to light two decades ago, is an acerbic account of how imprisonment can grind people down and scrape away all but the the last veneer of humanity.

Several convicts portray women in an uncommonly lively Don Juan pantomime, but except for the brief appearance of an ugly whore, the cast is entirely male. Intergender romance is only something to reminisce and lie about. In fact, "The House of the Dead" is so short of operatic drama in the conventional sense that two of the composer's students took it upon themselves after his death to fill out and brighten up its sparse orchestration and to revise its grim ending. Their version succeeded in suggesting precisely the tone of easy optimism that Janacek's original score tried to avoid.

It was not until 1958 that the original ending was restored in a Prague production by Jaroslav Vogel, Janacek's biographer. Mr. Kubelik restored the original scoring in 1962 and it was this completely genuine edition that he presented here, in an aptly brusque and prosaic translation commissioned by the Philharmonic from Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones.

In Mr. Kubelik's view, the opera's message is that "in every human there is a spark of God," even in a murderer. But Janacek declines to bear down on this point. The harsh tone of the work is relieved now and then, but only for a moment. Convicts assault one another for the slightest of reasons, the strong mock and intimidate the weak and the most stupid divert themselves by torturing a wounded eagle. There are interludes when friendship, kindness and compassion break through the prevailing gloom, though fleetingly.

The big symbolic moment comes when the eagle, its broken wing finally healed, is set free and flies out of its cage. A political prisoner named Petrovich (John Cheek), who seems to represent Dostoyevsky, is unexpectedly freed about the same time. However, the moment of exultation is cut short and the opera closes with a raucous dead march that puts the reality of prison existence back into focus.