Abstract

When discussing Leoš Janáček – whether in the field of musicology or among the general public – the topic of speech melodies often arises. What provokes interest is not only the composer’s peculiar activity of listening to human speech and recording its intonation in standard musical notation but also the musical features of such melodies. However, the view of speech melodies has changed over time, and even today, there is no general agreement on how to interpret them. The first generation of Janáček scholars, encouraged by the composer himself, considered these notated extracts to be scientific documents of real sounds which could facilitate the research of spoken language. This view was later criticised by younger musicologists, who emphasized the high level of stylization and subjective qualities of speech melodies, such as the author’s favourite melodic patterns. A third, alternative view has been provided by the writer Milan Kundera. In his essay Můj Janáček, he describes Janáček’s activity as a ritual of everydayness, through which the composer searches for the “vanished present” and the “melodic truth”. This paper provides an overview of Janáček’s concept of speech melodies against the background of all three abovementioned approaches. Discussing different categories of speech melodies – namely, normal, excited, and lyrical ones – it demonstrates Janáček’s scientific ambitions and striving for precision as well as his artistic creativity and a tendency to stylise. Also, especially in light of Kundera’s concept, speech melodies reveal themselves as tools to capture the elusive present.

Introduction

When the Czech composer Leoš Janáček is mentioned, it often evokes an image of a vital elderly man, running through Brno streets and parks with a notebook in his hand and jotting down fragments of overheard speech, birds singing or city noises in standard musical notation. His peculiar activity has always drawn scholarly interest. Constituting such a large amount of Janáček’s endeavour, it influenced both his compositional style and literary writings, and it can therefore partially hint at his aesthetic intentions. However, when it comes to interpretation or analysis of Janáček’s speech melodies, most musicologists remain slightly clueless, confronted with Janáček’s obscure language and thousands of short extracts of notated speech available in the Janáček Archive (see the next section).

This paper aims to briefly present Janáček’s concept of speech melodies. Relating to fundamental approaches in Janáček research, it stresses both scientific and artistic aspects of the composer’s activity. It does not attempt to illuminate any new details of Janáček’s theory but rather to outline it as a whole to a non-musicological audience.
1 Speech melodies

The term “nápěvky mluvy”, traditionally translated as “speech melodies”, was coined by Janáček himself in his study *O hudební stránce národních písní moravských* (On the Music Aspect of Moravian National Folksongs), published in 1901 as a preface to the folksong collection on which he collaborated with František Bartoš [1: 111–272]. He generally used the term not only in relation to human speech but also for the notated sounds of nature (birds, bubbling water) and occasionally inanimate objects (bells, noise from the street); he notated even the ringing in his ear. While the records of inanimate sound sources could have been collected out of curiosity or habit, the notation of animal sounds and human speech was a substantial part of Janáček’s scientific endeavour. For the sake of thematic unity, this paper leaves aside the melodies of inanimate sounds or animals, restricting its focus solely on human speech.

Janáček’s interest in speech arose in the 1880s. During this time, he repeatedly commented on the relationship between speech and music in his published newspaper articles. For instance, in the critique *Národní divadlo v Brně* (The National Theatre in Brno), released in his own periodical *Hudební listy* in 1886, he commented on the musico-literary relation within the form of melodrama and also observed the intonation of actors’ speech on stage, taking psychological perspective into consideration [2: 96–98]. Janáček started to systematically record, collect and reflect speech melodies in the summer of 1897 [3: 479] and continued in this activity until his death in 1928. He regularly wrote down notated extracts of overheard speech, complementing many of them with information on external circumstances (time, place, situation) or the speaker’s state of mind.

Crucial sources of the speech melodies are his 56 preserved notebooks, deposited in the Janáček Archive of Moravian Museum’s Music History Department. However, Janáček’s notated speech melodies appear also in other sources, which form two main categories: handwritten notes in other documents (such as correspondence or books from Janáček’s library) and printed versions, published as part of Janáček’s articles during his lifetime. The number of preserved speech melodies is estimated at more than 6 000 [4].

Although Janáček’s speech melodies are a popular topic in the field of musicology, the view of them has changed over time and even today, there is no general agreement on how to interpret them. The development of scholarly approaches to this topic was summarized by Alena Borková [5] and later by Veronika Vejvodová and Miloš Štědroň [6]; this paper builds on the latter account, preserving the categorisation outlined by Štědroň and Vejvodová. The first generation of Janáček scholars, encouraged by the composer himself, considered these notated extracts to be scientific documents of real sounds which could facilitate the research of spoken language. This view was later criticised by younger musicologists, who emphasized the high level of stylization and subjective qualities of speech melodies, such as the author’s favourite melodic patterns. As John Tyrrell puts it: “For all the ‘objective’, ‘scientific’ aspects that Janáček stressed, speech melodies reflect much more of him than they did of their speakers” [3: 489]. A third, alternative view has been provided by the writer Milan Kundera. In his essay *Můj Janáček*, he describes Janáček’s activity as a ritual of everydayness, through which the composer searches for the “vanished present” and the “melodic truth” [7: 30].

2 Scientific ambitions: Normal speech melodies

Janáček’s so-called speech-melody theory is rather an unstable set of observations and assumptions than a consistent theory, but the term “theory” is traditionally used in accordance with Janáček’s own texts [8: 282]. Since the composer did not write a synthetizing oeuvre on this topic, his views are distributed among numerous published or unpublished pieces of writing. Their synthesis reveals that Janáček regarded human speech from diverse
perspectives: he related it to psychology, had some ambitions in the field of linguistics, and took also musical aspects into account, hoping to exploit his observations in his own compositional process.

Among several types of speech melodies that Janáček distinguished, normal ("normální") melodies are most closely related to his scientific interest in language. Uttered in a calm state of mind, they usually employ only one tone – or two adjacent ones – and consist of even rhythmic values. Janáček did not consider them common in everyday speech, or pay particular attention to them. It was, however, this category that formed the basis for Janáček’s intended project – a sound dictionary of the Czech language. He outlines this intention in several texts, including the article Rozhraní mluvy a zpěvu (The Border Between Speech and Song), published in 1906 in the periodical Hlídka:

“We need a book on the ordinary melodic curves of speech in order to preserve the sound of the Czech language for future generations. It would be a dictionary in notes of the living Czech language, which would contain melodic phrases for everything which the Czech language is able to express. Let me give an example: When Mrs. Úprka painted my wooden chest, she discussed the colours:

She painted:

\[\text{Míša něty barvy}\]

[Those mixed colours]

Her conversation was quiet and peaceful; I did not want to disturb her in her work. These are what I would call normal melodic curves of speech. Here there is no annoyance, no bitterness, no anger, no gaiety, no sadness. They are pronounced almost without any alternations and accents, whether used in the morning or before going to bed. Whoever you may meet, will tell you the name of the parish in the same way. Which shows how the melodic curves of speech are general.” [9: 91–92]

The composer’s vision of a sound dictionary has never materialized. In his last will, he left one hundred thousand crowns to the Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, to fund phonetic research of living speech. His wish remained unfulfilled, however, due to legal obstacles and the historical situation: before the outbreak of WWII, all materials from the faculty’s Janáček Archive were transferred to the Moravian Museum, and after the closure of Czech universities in 1939, they were temporarily managed by another subject; many documents have never returned to the faculty [10: 214–218].

Despite Janáček’s idealisation of normal speech melodies, he did acknowledge the influence of the speaker’s subjective attributes on them. He was aware that every person has a unique way of articulating, and moreover, the speech is significantly shaped by individual dialects, which have an impact on intonation, stress or the length of vowels. Nevertheless, these individual features are independent of the speaker’s emotional state, and for this reason, Janáček considered even dialectical speech melodies normal [11: 131].

3 From scientific psychology to stylized melody: Excited speech melodies

What provoked even more interest in him – this time in the realm of psychology – were the speech melodies that deviated from the normal ones, reflecting the emotional state of the speaker. Due to Janáček’s unstable terminology, scholars use diverse terms for this type of speech melodies; Milena Černohorská, for instance, refers to them as excited ("vzrušené", also “nápěvky vzrušené mluvy”) [11: 134, 137]. As Černohorská points out, it is exactly this
focus on inner, subjective aspects of speech that differentiates Janáček from those linguists who examined speech intonation only with concern to the content of the speech or the word and sentence accents [11: 135]. Otakar Hostinský, for instance, focused on normal speech, exempt from affects or subjective irregularities, as he studied the objective features of declamation [12]. Janáček, on the other hand, concentrated on the emotional state of the speaker, which he believed was recognisable from the melody of speech. In this regard, his perspective resembled that of the phonetician Josef Chlumský [13]. Janáček meticulously took notes of diverse circumstances that possibly impacted the final speech melody in terms of intonation, rhythm, register and speed of delivery. He viewed the speech melodies as signs of a person’s inner state, which is formed by external conditions, and therefore inseparable from their original environment from which they stem, i.e. from both the external situation and the speaker’s consciousness. As he explains in a feuilleton1 from the periodical Lidové noviny entitled Moravany! Morawaan!:

“Is it possible to retain in one’s mind a speech melody and pull back a little the curtain behind which it is being born? It issues from the lips as an image embossed on a gold coin emerges from the mint. We have to consider the whole coin: you cannot select only the relief of the image. This melody, its surface and edges, are of one metal: this is how speech melody is joined together with the contents of our consciousness. This is how it is moulded together with the reflection of the speaker’s inner life, and the reflection of the environment in which it is spoken.” [14: 42–43]

Janáček indeed respected the link between a speech melody and its original environment and preserved it even in his feuilletons, which are otherwise often stylized and attest to the author’s literary ambitions [15].

What has often led to misunderstanding – among both Janáček’s contemporaries and younger musicologists – was his view of notation. Naturally, there is a significant gap between music and a “melody” of speech, especially when the sound is recorded by means of standard musical notation, which restricts the intonation to pitches of a narrow range within a mere chromatic scale. Moreover, a conspicuously large number of speech melodies consist of Janáček’s favourite musical intervals – seconds, fourths and fifths [16: 133–135]. The rhythm might seem much more precise in comparison: many notated extracts feature complicated rhythmic patterns and diverse tone lengths, thus evoking a sense of haphazardness, which may approach the nature of a non-stylized human speech. Such sense of objectivity is strengthened by Janáček’s precise inscriptions of the melodies’ duration. Especially after 1922, when he – inspired by the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt – started using the Hipp’s chronoscope to measure time, the inscriptions become exceptionally specific, recorded to the nearest hundredth second. However, as John Tyrrell points out, even the rhythm does not fully reflect reality, as the chronoscope was not portable, and Janáček had to keep the sound in his memory before measuring it at home [3: 478].

Admittedly, such notation inaccuracies can be interpreted as evidence of Janáček’s creativity and aesthetic preferences, and in the case of intervals, it seems plausible. Nevertheless, Janáček himself considered conventional notation unsatisfactory, as it approaches the original sound of speech only roughly. In the article Rozhhrani hudby a zpěvu, he reflects the trivialisation and “hardening” of speech melodies when written in notation, reminding also that speech melodies are not intended to be sung [2: 348]. Therefore, it would be a misinterpretation to deny the scientific nature of Janáček’s records only on based on (self-evident) notation imprecision or insufficiency.

1 Many of Janáček’s newspaper articles – especially those published in Lidové noviny – are traditionally referred to as feuilletons. The literary genre of the feuilleton and the style and content of Janáček’s feuilletons are characterised by Tiina Vainiomäki [8: 129–133], who describes these texts as “small snapshot-like belletristique articles” [8: 129].
4 Artistic stylization: Lyrical speech melodies

The subjective nature of Janáček’s observation emerges in connection with another category of speech melodies, for which Černohorská used the term lyrical (“lyrické”) [11: 141]. When studying such melodies, Janáček does not concentrate on the speaker’s current affect revealed in the utterance at a particular moment, but rather attempts to capture a general mood of the speech. He usually examines several lyrical speech melodies together, trying to find their underlying key which unifies them – an emotional scale (“stupnice citová”) [17: 432]. Such search for a key as a framework for several speech melodies was a conscious process, reflected by Janáček himself in his writings, such as in Rytá slova (Words Engraved) from the newspaper Lidové noviny [2: 482–484].

Using music theory vocabulary, he frequently described this kind of speech almost as if it was a musical composition. After attending the linguist Josef Zubatý’s lecture in October 1925, Janáček published an eponymous feuilleton in Lidové noviny where he described Zubatý’s intonation as ranging from f¹ to B♭ with the timbre of viola d’amour [2: 563]. This tendency manifested itself even stronger in the aforementioned article Rytá slova, which comprised numerous speech melodies of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia [2: 482–484]. Summarizing Masaryk’s two-day lecture, Janáček even mentions different keys of the president’s speech on the two respective days: while during the first day he found the speech dominated by A-flat minor without modulations, in the next day’s speech he heard Hypolydian D with a changing second (E–E-sharp) and fourth (G–G-sharp), which reminded him of the sun without mists. At the end of the feuilleton, he even put down the two chords of the respective keys:

![Figure 1. Two underlying chords of Masaryk’s speech in the feuilleton Rytá slova [2: 484]](image)

Rytá slova is not the only feuilleton of Janáček’s that balances on the borderline between speech examination and music composition. In several other writings, the composer writes down a speech melody and later repeats it with harmonized accompaniment. For instance, in the feuilleton Počátek románu (The Beginning of a Romance), he captures a dialogue of two ladies at the train station in Brno. One of them says: “We will stand here, and I know he’s not coming!” The other woman responds: “It doesn’t matter!” [2: 495].
Then he cites both melodies (albeit slightly changed and divided into measures), this time with harmonization, which attributes a particular key to them.

Although there is undeniably a certain level of stylization, the depicted process suggests that the idea of a key stems from the observation and does not precede it. In his study on naturalism, Janáček himself confirms that he does not have an idea of a particular chord before he jots down speech melodies, but – on the contrary – the chord or key arises from the speech extracts as their result [18: 174; English translation: 19: 297].

5 Speech melodies as pictures of the present
In his essay Můj Janáček [7] (the first section of which – A la Recherche du Présent Perdu – is part of Les testaments trahis, in English The Testaments Betrayed), Milan Kundera provides an alternative interpretation of Janáček’s speech melodies. He describes Janáček’s activity as a ritual of everydayness, through which the composer searches for the elusive present and the truth of expression:

“...The search for the vanished present; the search for the melodic truth of a moment; the wish to surprise and capture the fleeting truth; the wish to plumb by that means the mystery of the immediate reality constantly deserting our lives, which thereby becomes the thing we know least about. This, I think, is the ontological import of Janáček’s studies of spoken language and, perhaps, the ontological import of all his music.” [20: 138]
Janáček indirectly confirms this view in the feuilleton Loni a letos (This Year and Last) from the periodical Hlída: “The melody of speech is a truthful transient musical characterization of a person; it is his soul and encompasses his entire being in a photographic instant” [21: 246]. The metaphor of a photograph then recurs in the composer’s later texts on speech melodies.

When the melodies appear in Janáček’s literary articles, notation – alongside many literary devices – becomes a crucial tool for expressing time. First, it unites “narrating time” and “narrated time”: encountering notation, a reader is forced to slow down the process of reading and “play” the speech or other sound at a similar speed as it originally sounded. This effect becomes particularly obvious in the writings where speech melodies dominate, such as the abovementioned Rytá slova. Second, it provides a sense of the present even when used within a description of the past, namely in citation of a person who quotes someone else or in an indirect speech. On another level, the present is expressed by the haphazard order of ideas in Janáček’s texts – the more the hierarchy of motives and coherence are neglected, the more a particular moment arises in its realness, captured in the way it is immediately perceived. This is, however, related more to Janáček’s literary style than to his views of speech melody.

Probably the most poignant examples of Janáček’s attempt to capture the present are the speech melodies of his dying twenty-year-old daughter Olga. In February 1903, during the last days before her death, Janáček recorded some of her sentences and words.

![Figure 4. Speech melody of Janáček’s daughter (“lying on the settee, sobbing: I don’t want to die, I want to live!”). Reproduced and translated in [8: 179].](image)

![Figure 5. Speech melody of Janáček’s daughter [last sights: “ah-h”; God be with you, my darling]. Reproduced in [8: 179], translated in [22: 258].](image)

As Paul Christiansen discusses, it might seem even ghoulish that in such a situation, Janáček paid attention to his daughter’s voice intonation and musical attributes of her speech [22: 255]. However, her speech melodies – unlike most other ones – were neither scientific material nor creative sources to Janáček: they were simply the composer’s way of capturing the present moment and immortalizing the memory of his child. Kundera’s concept of the vanished present perfectly illuminates such intention.
Conclusion

Leoš Janáček’s speech melodies represent an attractive yet challenging research topic. Their interpretation is hampered by the fragmentation of the composer’s theory and by his specific, almost untranslatable language, which practically confines the research to scholars with excellent command of Czech. The disunity of Janáček’s explanations has been mirrored by the diversity of scholarly approaches, emphasizing either the scientific or the artistic aspects of the composer’s activity.

This paper demonstrated selected features of Janáček’s speech-melody theory, relating them to three ways of interpretation. Each perspective thus illuminated different aspects of such a complex topic. Naturally, Janáček’s speech melodies could be examined from many other perspectives and represent an ideal object for interdisciplinary research. Hopefully, presenting this topic outside of the musicological audience might also contribute to wider interdisciplinary collaboration and deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

References


