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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Moonlight, History and Beer: Janáček's Mr Brouček

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Leoš Janáček's *Die Ausflüge des Herrn Brouček* at the Bregenz Festival is a rare and exhilarating pleasure: a "house opera" that embraces the full oddity of this burlesque score while turning its satire into pointed contemporary theatre. In the Große Saal of the Festspielhaus, Yuval Sharon and his team deliver a production that feels both fantastical and surgically precise, staging Brouček's escapes from reality.

He escapes first to the moon, then into fifteenth-century Prague—as a mirror of our own reluctance to learn from history. Often overshadowed by *Jenufa* and *Káťa Kabanová*, *Die Ausflüge des Herrn Brouček* is Janáček's only opera not premiered in Brno, but at the Prague National Theatre in 1920, and it's also his most openly satirical. Built as a "double opera" in two parts, it sends the thoroughly unheroic landlord Matej Brouček into bizarre societies: first among moon-dwellers who parody aestheticism and artistic pretension, then among Hussite patriots whose fervour exposes Brouček's own cowardly opportunism.

Bregenz embraces this structure by treating each "excursion" as a distinct theatrical world, while keeping Brouček himself recognisably "one of us," as one critic aptly put it—a man who wants only his peace and beer, and who will not change no matter what history throws at him. Yuval Sharon's production leans into the opera's surreal humour without reducing it to farce. The moon becomes a stylised, almost cartoonish society of art snobs, realised through bold colour, eccentric costumes and a stage architecture that feels deliberately unstable—platforms, staircases and suspended elements suggest a world where taste and status are constantly shifting.

In the second part, medieval Prague is not presented as cosy heritage; instead, Sharon creates a tightened space of banners, processions and quasi-ritualistic movement, highlighting the pressures of nationalist mythmaking. What makes the staging so effective is its clarity of focus. Brouček's journey is always at the centre, visually and dramaturgically. The fantastical environments are richly detailed, but they never drown the narrative; instead, they reveal how each society projects its own fantasies and blind spots onto this thoroughly ordinary man.

Sharon uses recurring visual motifs—mirrors, doorways, elevated vantage points—to show Brouček as both observer and observed, constantly confronted with versions of community he cannot fully join. Musically, the evening benefits greatly from Robert Jindra's conducting of the Wiener Symphoniker and the Prager Philharmonischer Chor. Janáček's idiosyncratic speech-melody and quick-silver orchestration can easily

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feel fragmented; here, the score breathes in long arcs, with rhythmic precision and a keen sense of dramatic timing. Jindra allows the orchestral colour to glow—woodwind detail, brass bite, sudden surges of strings—yet keeps textures transparent enough for the Czech original text to register clearly in the hall.

The chorus, crucial especially in the Hussite scenes, moves with impressive discipline between burlesque exaggeration and genuine intensity, supporting Sharon's staging in making collective behaviour both comic and unsettling. Peter Hoare in the title role anchors the performance with a tenor that combines flexibility and character. Vocally, he negotiates Janáček's angular lines with security, colouring them to express Brouček's constant oscillation between self-pity, bluster and panic.

Dramatically, Hoare resists the temptation to play the character as pure buffoon. Instead, his Brouček is painfully recognisable: not evil, not particularly stupid, just habitually lazy and morally evasive, someone for whom comfort outweighs any call to courage. Around him, a strong ensemble fills Janáček's gallery of moon-dwellers, patriots and bureaucrats with sharply etched types, ensuring that each new society feels vivid in its own right.

The Bregenz dramaturgy explicitly frames *Die Ausflüge des Herrn Brouček* as a satire on "bourgeois self-satisfaction, moral inertia, and the eternal human inability to learn from history", and Sharon's production honours that description without heavy didacticism. Contemporary resonances arise organically: the moon's aesthetic elite recall our own cultural bubbles; the fifteenth-century zealots echo current debates about identity, loyalty and who gets to claim the mantle of "true" patriotism. Brouček remains resolutely unchanged through all this, and that is the point—the opera's sting lies in the realisation that spectacular historical lessons, whether celestial or medieval, do not automatically produce ethical growth.

That the Bregenz Festival chooses this rare Janáček as its indoor "house opera" next to a crowd-pleaser on the lake stage fits a long-standing tradition: the Seebühne finances the riskier work in the Festspielhaus. In 2026, that risk pays off artistically. *Die Ausflüge des Herrn Brouček* emerges not as an eccentric side note, but as a vital, oddly contemporary meditation on our tendency to flee discomfort rather than face it. For audiences willing to follow Janáček onto the moon and into the past, Bregenz offers a production of real bite and imagination, one that proves this "unusual opera of the 20th century" can speak with startling clarity to the 21st.

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