Some mysteries are more puzzling than others. At first encounter, the secrets of The Makropulos Case appear buried as deeply as the secret its enigmatic heroine conceals until the final moments. The audience shares in the guesswork of those who try to grasp Emilia Marty’s intentions until, like them, we stand awed before her revelation, grateful for our mortality even as we dread its approach. No one can leave The Makropulos Case unmoved. Yet, overwhelming as the opera’s final ten numinous minutes may be, Janáček intended his conclusion not as a stand-alone episode, but as the drama’s culmination. If his purpose is not more immediately apparent than Emilia’s, the reason lies in a plot revealed less by onstage action than by conversation, and also in the subtlety of Janáček’s technique. In fact, The Makropulos Case unfolds in a continuous trajectory, its profundities delivered so deftly we may fail to recognize them until we realize we are engulfed. This mystery is about ourselves.

In 1922, Janáček attended a Prague performance of a new play by Karel Čapek—Věc Makropulos, to use the Czech title, Věc meaning case or affair, or even thing. Čapek (1890–1938) enlisted science fiction to ponder philosophical questions. In an earlier drama, the dystopian R.U.R. (in which he coined the word “robot”), automatons revolt against their inventors, who engineered their mechanical assistants to free themselves from the petty work that stands between humans and greatness. Here, by almost a century, Čapek anticipates and challenges the argument that artificial intelligence and singularity will ensure human perfection. For Čapek believed in human limitations, and he re-asserts that creed in Věc Makropulos, exposing the age-old quest for eternal life as a pointless exercise. In Back to Methuselah, which also premiered in 1922, the same year as Věc Makropulos, Bernard Shaw argued that an extended lifespan would advance civilization. Čapek arrived at a different conclusion. Removing life’s endpoint, he suggests, erases the impetus to live. In Čapek’s play, Janáček spotted material for an opera.

Janáček understood elixirs of youth. In 1917, at age 63, after years in a marriage whose trials had long since displaced its rewards, he fell desperately in love with Kamila Stösslová, a married woman almost four decades his junior. With Kamila he maintained an impassioned, mostly one-sided, and (it is believed) purely emotional affair, conducted mainly through hundreds of letters, and ending only with his death in 1928. Kamila inflamed him with a renewed sense of his possibilities, and from that confidence came most of his greatest music.

Čapek, surprised that Janáček wished to set a play filled with little action and much talk, nonetheless gave the go-ahead and told Janáček he was free to refashion the story. The composer himself crafted the libretto, reworking it three times, turning Čapek’s bitter comedy into a meditation on life and death. He also cut some of the connective tissue that helps theater viewers navigate the plot. To an English-language audience approaching the work with no help besides a supertitle translation, Janáček’s opera can be a tough case to crack. So tough that The Makropulos Case, completed in 1925 and first staged the next year (in Brno, capital of Janáček’s native
Moravia), came to the United States only in 1966, when the San Francisco Opera presented it in English. Three years earlier, Hans Hollander, who had known and worked with Janáček, fretted that the “three acts are cluttered by so much argument and so many complications arising from the past, that the dramatic concision of the action suffers…. Janáček's music was scarcely able to combat the weaknesses of the libretto.” Jaroslav Vogel, in his comprehensive Janáček biography, believed otherwise: “With consummate mastery, [Janáček] underlines every expressive point offered by the lines of text.” And a later commentator, Ian Horsbrugh, synthesizes both points of view: “The absence of much in the way of visual excitement … means that the whole of Janáček’s ingenuity is concentrated in the music.”

Janáček does indeed present his case with arresting music, but Hollander hits a nerve when he objects to “complications arising from the past.” So for a firmer grasp of the fast-moving action, consider the two-part backstory. It is peopled by important characters, only one of whom we meet.

Backstory, Part 1: In the days of Bohemian monarch Rudolf II (1552–1612), court alchemist Hieronymus Makropulos formulated an elixir of youth for the sovereign. Rudolf ordered the potion tested on Makropulos’s teenage daughter, Elina. Her apparently fatal reaction enraged Rudolf, who jailed her father. But Elina recovered and escaped. Now possessing three hundred years of life, she made her way through the coming centuries, assuming various identities and always using aliases with the initials E.M., matching those of her birth name.
Backstory, Part 2: Early in the 19th century, as the opera singer Elian MacGregor, Elina fell in love with the Bohemian nobleman Josef Prus and bore him a son, Ferdinand Gregor (surname borrowed from “MacGregor”), who was to inherit the Prus estate. On his deathbed, the delirious Baron Prus named another heir. Finding no written will, the Prus family challenged Ferdinand Gregor’s claim.

The opera is set in Prague, early in the 20th century. The Gregor-Prus lawsuit is still an ongoing battle, waged by the families’ descendants, Albert Gregor and Jaroslav Prus. The diva Emilia Marty, a cold-hearted and cynical beauty, takes unusual interest in the suit and somehow knows its details—including the location of the baron’s will. She needs someone to retrieve it, for sequestered with the will is a document lent to the baron, but which he never used: the elixir’s formula. Marty knows all this because she is in fact Elina Makropulos—aka Elian MacGregor, among others. (That she was 16 when she drank the potion guaranteeing her 300 more years and now claims her age as 337 is a detail best overlooked.) Desperate for the potion to extend her life, she feels her past overtaking her. In Gregor and Prus, who are intrigued by her beauty, and in the young lovers Kristina and Janek, she encounters emotions she can no longer feel. She has been corroded by the years. Having exhausted her desire to continue, she relinquishes her hold on the formula, at last reclaiming her humanity by succumbing to it and its inevitable consequence.

Whether the aging composer was coming to terms with his own mortality here is an open question. What we do know is that Janáček worked at a high level of Kamila-inspired intensity (“I wrote like a machine!”) as he brought the Byzantine scenario to life with the power of his mature style, by turns angular and lyrical, always radiant and stripped of sentimentality. This opera is a study in how music transforms words, making even a prosaic text resonate.

The Act I introduction opens with a nervous ostinato in winds, trumpets, timpani, and low strings. over this, we hear the first identifiable melodic line, a sighing, minor-mode theme. Its mood is apprehensive, but its shape foreshadows the consoling Act III chorale that will dispel the opera’s many tensions. Alternating with this anxious music is a second theme, lyrical and full-bodied, its contours and spirit anticipating the Act III transition to the conclusion, played there forte over pounding timpani. Between these two themes comes a curious fanfare for offstage brass. We will hear fanfares again, always associated with Emilia Marty’s beginnings, back in the court of Emperor Rudolf.

Janáček enlivens the most routine passages. Listen as, early in Act I, the brisk orchestral underpinning keeps the action moving while the lawyer Dr. Kolenatý explains the suit Gregor contra Prus. Given the composer’s characteristic attention to the rhythms of language, we can almost forget the characters are singing, so closely do their musical phrases mimic speech.

The real magic of Janáček’s musical structure is found in the correspondences he establishes across the opera’s span. Early in Act II, Marty asks if Kristina and Janek have been “to heaven” yet. Have they made love? Contemptuous, she all but spits out the question. Then, as Marty assures Kristina that sex is not worth the effort, Janáček introduces a sad, six-note figure. Here it is associated with Emilia’s ennui. Minutes later it becomes a quirky, off-center tune that underscores the randy joie de vivre of Hauk, who

This year marks the 50th anniversary of San Francisco Opera’s U.S. premiere of The Makropulos Case. Opening on November 19, 1966, the production (sung in English) featured Australian soprano Marie Collier in the role of Emilia Marty. In the left image is Collier with David Giosso, Gregory Dempsey, and Howard Fried. The right image includes Collier with Carol Todd during the opera’s climactic final scene.
recognizes Emilia from the days when she was the Spanish dancer Eugenia Montez, his lost love. In Act III, the “ennui” figure recurs as Emilia tells Gregor she has arrived at her end, and again as the name Elina Makropulos is uttered. Then, at “there’s nothing more,” the theme transforms into a wistful melody so filled with dramatic potential that it can be translated into the last thing we hear in this opera, a final reaffirming statement as Emilia dies, having regained her identity as Elina.

Janáček’s tight thematic web, though not obvious, is part of his music’s fascination. One motif generates another. For his purposes, Janáček said, Wagnerian leitmotif “has not sufficient resource and flexibility within itself to reveal the constantly changing emotions and motives of the character[s]." Flexibility. Few things here are repeated just as they first appear. Those fanfares that recall the days of Rudolf II are exceptions. Often they are repeated literally, for what is past objects to editing. Yet as Emilia reaches her final moments, entering new territory, the fanfares evolve. Now they sound in the strings and orchestral brass, their intensity building until manic strings alone take over. The brass rejoins them. Then all is swept away by the broad, organ-toned orchestral affirmation, punctuated by trumpet flourishes, as the ennui theme transfigures into the greatest of the opera’s fanfares. It announces we have come full circle and heralds our arrival, with Elina Makropulos, at the end.

Finnish soprano Karita Mattila made her triumphant role debut as Emilia Marty in San Francisco Opera’s 2010 production of The Makropulos Case.

Larry Rothe is author of the San Francisco Symphony history Music for a City, Music for the World and co-author of For the Love of Music.

More about Janáček and The Makropulos Case

Books

Ian Horsbrugh, Leoš Janáček: The Field that Prospered (Scribner’s). Elegant, perceptive, thorough.


Karel Čapek’s The Makropulos Case is included (with R.U.R., The Insect Play, and The White Plague) in Four Plays, translated by Peter Majer and Cathy Porter (Methuen).

Recordings and Video
A video production of The Makropulos Case from the Glyndebourne Festival, staged by Nicholas Lehnhoff and directed for the screen by Brian Large, stars Anja Silja as Emilia Marty. The singing and acting are excellent, as is the London Philharmonic under Andrew Davis (Kultur).

Charles Mackerras (San Francisco Opera Principal Guest Conductor from 1993 to 1996) championed Janáček and recorded The Makropulos Case twice. His Decca recording, made with the Vienna Philharmonic, is sung in Czech and features Elisabeth Söderström as Emilia Marty. This is currently available for download at deccaclassics.com and is also part of a multi-disc set that includes four other Janáček operas (minus libretti).

Mackerras’ later Chandos recording, a production of the English National Opera, features Cheryl Barker as Marty. This is sung in English, a helpful way of getting to know the opera, though English fails to convey the elegance of Janáček’s setting. In a recorded interview that fills out the second disc (of two discs), Mackerras discusses his relationship with Janáček’s operas and speaks about Makropulos.