

Lada Valešová

Czech-British Conductor Answers Questions from The Friends



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In the context of British musical life, do you see an arc of conductors particularly inspired by Janáček?

The arc is present and clear to see for those who take interest in appreciation for Czech music in Great Britain. Sir Charles Mackerras, the centenary of whose birth we celebrated in 2025, played without any doubt a decisive role in popularising Janáček's music and bringing it to the British audiences. Through his studies in Prague with Václav Talich he became an authentic advocate for the Czech musical tradition abroad at the time when this wasn't always possible for the Czech musicians stuck behind the Iron Curtain. Maestro Jiří Bělohlávek, so beloved and appreciated, embodied this tradition and brought it into the heart of the music world in the UK. His former student, Jakub Hrůša, has started his tenure at the Royal Opera House as a new Music Director with a triumphant *Jenůfa* and *The Makropulos Case*, and is writing a new exciting chapter of Czech music in the UK at the highest level. Tomáš Hanus leading Welsh National Opera through stormy waters is another conductor Czechs can be rightly proud of. But also let's not forget the major contribution made by Libor Pešek as a Music Director and then Conductor Laureate at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. I also include Vilém Tauský, whose name was mentioned to me with warmth and respect when I first studied at the Guildhall School of Music. He left a huge impact on his students as well as at the BBC, where he conducted many programmes, including the opera *Švanda the Bagpiper*. I would like to mention translators and language coaches, late Ilja Boháč at Glyndebourne and Karel Janovický at the Royal Opera House. For

me as an artist, it's my second nature to breathe this music and I am happy to be in a position to inspire others to love it as much as I do.

Without Sir Charles Mackerras, do you think that the UK would have had to wait a lot longer than thirty years for the British premiere of *Kát'a Kabanová* in 1951?

It's not an unrealistic possibility! After all, for example *Rusalka* has been premiered for the very first time only this year at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm, and although there have been many productions of *The Makropulos Case* in the UK and abroad, its Covent Garden premiere happened only in November 2025. Every masterpiece needs its advocates at the right time.

Does the global reach of Janáček's operas bring a wider awareness of Czech culture?

It's very tempting to say "yes" and to congratulate ourselves. The reality is that on the global scale the world of opera grabs a very small margin of international attention and it's nearly exclusively consigned to the countries which have some tradition of it. It's certainly true that for a small nation such as Czechs, its cultural output is punching well above its weight. We need to enable the process to continue through supporting the arts, the young artists and musicians, and to produce work which will win over and inspire new audiences.

When you were starting your career, how receptive to singing in Czech were most anglophone opera soloists in the UK? In the early 1990s ROH still used English for 'The Cunning Little Vixen'.

Since day one as a student at the Guildhall School I have been asked by singers to help them learn arias and songs in Czech. These were young students at the time, my own age. This generation matured and now in the UK we have amazing artists such as Nicky Spence and Natalya Romaniw, amongst others, who sing Czech idiomatically and as close to the native speaker level as one can wish for. There are different opinions on translations and singing in the original language, but I have hardly come across an international top-level house which would not perform the opera in its original language today. However, some composers themselves stated that their operas should be performed in the language of the audience; in an interview Shostakovich says exactly that. I think singing in the language of the audience has its important place. If I were to stage for example *The Bartered Bride* in a smaller local opera company, I can envisage using a good translation and making the production more accessible for my local

audience. There should be time and place for both offering the audience a choice.

Do you feel that any opera of Bohuslav Martinů will take its place alongside Smetana's 'The Bartered Bride', Dvořák's 'Rusalka' and Janáček's 'Jenůfa' as a truly internationally known Czech opera?

If it were to happen, Martinů operas would need to be programmed more frequently by the prominent companies and festivals. Speaking as a conductor, I was delighted to conduct a Martinů opera double bill of *The Comedy of the Bridge* and *Alexander Twice* at the Royal Academy of Music. Students took to it like ducks to water and we had a great response from our audience.

Is there a Czech opera that you feel is unjustly neglected?

I love the *Charlatan* by Pavel Haas, and would love to see it staged here in the UK. It has been done in Wexford some years ago, and I've had a tremendous joy working on it in Ostrava last year in a brilliant staging by Ondřej Havelka. It's a big piece and demanding considerable forces, but worth it.

Is teaching important to you?

Teaching is a prominent part of my output as a musician. I didn't seek it out, it found me. Results are most obvious when seeing my former students grow into artists, as well as teachers, educators, music administrators and even music agents, whom I meet in the profession not only in the UK but also when working abroad. As an artist I consider music making most artistically important to me, but on a human level the impact of mentoring leaves possibly a deeper legacy: my former students will hopefully carry a bit of what I taught them into the future.

What are you currently working on?

I was in 'seventh heaven' in a role of an Assistant and Cover Conductor for Maestro Hruša on *The Makropulos Case* at Covent Garden (premiered in November 2025), where I also looked after the Czech language for our main and cover casts. In early spring I'll be in Dublin at the Irish National Opera on *Rusalka* once more as an Assistant/ Cover Conductor and Language specialist. I will conduct Britten's *The Rape Of Lucretia* at the Royal Academy of Music in the summer term.

What made you take up the baton?

Years spent in the opera rehearsal rooms as a coach with strong musical opinions. Instead of brooding and bringing potentially negative energy into the

room, one day I asked myself: "If you are so clever, why don't you do it yourself and see how it goes?"

Does it feel a bit lonely in the world of female conductors?

I can only speak for myself. It's never lonely in the rehearsal room, or with the orchestra or in the pit. I also come from already a rich and well-established career, with human and artistic connections and very much appreciate these very same colleagues and opera companies giving me opportunities to develop as a conductor. However, it is solitary work - the preparation, the study, the responsibility for a big organism of people. That's a role of a leader who must have the strength to take that responsibility. I have been privileged to be part of some fantastic programmes for female conductors of which I'll name the Royal Philharmonic Society's WoCo (Woman Conductors) founded by Alice Farnham. RPO gave our cohorts brilliant opportunities to work with the Royal Northern Sinfonia, amongst others. But you stand alone on the podium, and the orchestras and singers know very quickly if you are up to the job.

Which is your favourite piece of music that you have conducted?

Eugene Onegin (Holland Park, 2022). So far! Also, *Jenůfa* in the rehearsals at the Royal Opera in 2024.

Do you also work in the Czech Republic?

I've mentioned earlier my work on *Charlatan* in Ostrava National Opera. I also did a wonderful project in collaboration between the Birmingham City Opera, Opera Europa and the Smetana Festival in Litomyšl called *Two Widows - New Look*. With an excellent British cast of four, Czech musicians and an Italian director and creative team it was very much to my taste. It had a great success with the audiences and I hope more of similar projects will follow.

Do you see yourself as an advocate of Czech music?

I see myself as a bridge between the cultures, someone who aims to unite and enable everyone to share their artistic vision. Similarly, I love working with opera directors from all backgrounds curious to see and help them to embody their view of Czech opera. Czech music has an international overreach and importance. We can be proud to share and enable others to tell it their own way. That's what art is all about.

Lada Valešová donated a piano recital to The Friends in the Slovak Embassy in 2010