



The Makropulos Case

Leoš Janáček

A Cure for Death

People have been hoping they could find a cure for death for centuries. In the Renaissance several doctors had a go at finding a potion that would prevent death, or at least infinitely extend life. They were of course unsuccessful, but the quest for an Elixir of Life excited everybody. However, what nobody seemed to be interested in was, what would happen if you did find it? What would it be like to live for 100s of years?

Two Plays

That thought struck two playwrights (apparently quite independently) in the 1920s. In 1921 George Bernard Shaw wrote his play, *Back to Methuselah*, and a year later the Czech writer Karel Capek wrote his, the *Vec Makropulos* (The Makropulos Case). Both were billed as comedies, and were about people who had managed to live for 300 years, but the feel of the plays is quite different. Capek's play reads like a thriller, how does the heroine Emilia Marty know so much about the past? (Answer: she's lived through most of it). Shaw's play is more philosophic, how would longevity affect the human race? He takes five acts to work it out, but decides that (after some re-adjustment) the human race would benefit enormously.

One Opera

The Czech composer, Leos Janacek, saw Capek's play in Brno in 1926, and immediately decided to turn it into an opera. He was probably attracted by the fact that the heroine was an opera singer but he was also interested in the idea of a very long life. Unlike Shaw, he took a tragic view of the situation: anybody who really lived for 300 years, he thought, would be worn out, beyond passion, emotion, or even interest in human life.

The Characters

Janacek's opera is dominated by **Emilia Marty** (soprano) a famous opera singer. She becomes involved in the lives and legal quarrels of two families. The first is represented by Albert **Gregor** (tenor), and the second by Baron **Prus** (baritone). The case is handled for Gregor by Dr **Kolenatý** (bass baritone) a lawyer, and Vitek (tenor) his clerk. Prus is a lawyer himself and looks after his own case. He has a son, **Janek** (tenor) who falls under Emilia's spell, as does Vitek's daughter, **Kristina** (soprano), a young opera singer. This is not the sort of show where you have to worry about people's names: as long as you remember that Gregor and Prus are fighting over a will, the role of the other characters in the story will become quite obvious. Only one character rattles round the stage for no apparent reason, **Hauk-Sendorf** (tenor) a retired diplomat, who is old and slightly mad.

Act I

The opera starts in a lawyer's office in Prague, in 1923. The clerk, Vitek, is up to his neck in documents referring to the Gregor v. Prus case: the papers go back almost a century and the present claimant (young Albert Gregor) chats cheerfully to him, convinced that it's all going very well. Vitek, who saw Gregor's father shoot himself, is less sure. Vitek's

daughter, Kristina, runs in, full of her morning at the opera house, where she has heard the great diva, Emilia Marty.

Enter a star

At which point Dr Kolenatý enters – as does Emilia Marty herself. (The stage directions say she should enter in a 'strange light'; it's almost as if she's 'beamed in' from a spaceship) The diva is extremely interested in the Gregor case and Kolenatý rattles off the facts to her. In 1827, he says, Baron Josef Prus died intestate (that is without leaving a will) and his estate was claimed by a certain Ferdinand Gregor, who said that Prus had promised it to him verbally. (Prus had indeed mumbled something about his estate going to one 'Mach Gregor' on his deathbed.) However Gregor's claim was far too vague, the Prus family got the money, the Gregor family took them to court – and the case has been going on ever since.

A cupboard

Marty interrupts to say that the 'Mach' Gregor mentioned by Josef Prus was in fact Ferdinand Gregor, the baron's illegitimate son by a Scottish opera singer, Ellian MacGregor. "Indeed?" says Kolenatý, "well, his descendants are about to lose the case, they haven't got a will." Marty immediately describes a cupboard in the Prus house where the will, and other documents, are hidden: Kolenatý is convinced she's making this up, but Gregor tells him to go and investigate the cupboard, while he stays behind to talk to the opera singer. A rather strange conversation develops. The young man is obviously infatuated with Marty and flings himself about, threatening to shoot himself if he doesn't win the case. He is a high tenor and sounds very impressive, but Marty is uninterested. Instead she asks him if he knows about an ancient Greek document, which should be bound up with his family papers. Gregor says he's never come across the manuscript.

Proof

Sure enough Kolenatý reappears, with Baron Prus, and the will. It was exactly where Marty said it was. Prus congratulates Gregor on his victory, though of course he will have to prove that his ancestor, Ferdinand Gregor, really was the deceased Prus's illegitimate son. Marty offers to provide the proof.

Act II

Admirers

The action switches to the opera house. Emilia Marty has just enjoyed a triumphant success, even the stage hands think she is marvellous and Baron Prus arrives to congratulate her. He is accompanied by his son, Janek, who has brought along Kristina. Gregor too appears, with flowers and a present. Marty receives them all with barely concealed contempt. She manages to be rude to everybody and dismisses everything they're interested in, great singers, opera, love itself, as worthless. When asked what she does think is worthwhile a sinister drum begins a rat tat in the orchestra, Marty replies: "Nothing, absolutely nothing!" A feeble-minded old man, Hauk-Sendorf, wanders in, babbling about Eugenia Montez, a gypsy he loved fifty years ago. The orchestra responds by playing a dance rhythm, with castanets, and Marty tells him that Eugenia is not dead; she asks him (in Spanish) for a kiss.

Initials

Prus stays behind to ask Marty about Ellian MacGregor, whose love letters he has found, and whom he suspects of being one "Elina Makropulos", described in the parish registers as Ferdinand's mother. He's noticed that both women have the same initials, and he thinks this looks suspicious. (Prus doesn't notice that Emilia Marty has the same initials as well, but the audience usually does...) He says that Gregor will have to prove he's descended from "Ferdinand Makropulos" before he can win the case. Marty barely listens to him, all she wants is an unopened envelope that Prus has found with the other papers. She offers to pay for it, but Prus, realising that the letter gives him power over her, refuses.

A Deal

Marty is exhausted. Gregor re-appears and she tells him that the document she gave him, proving Ferdinand Gregor was Josef Prus's illegitimate son, will have to be returned: he's now got to prove that Ferdinand was descended from his mother, Elina Makropulos. This is all getting rather confusing, but Gregor is in no mood to argue as he is determined to tell the opera singer how much he loves her. But Marty is too tired to listen, she falls asleep and wakes to find Janek standing in front of her. The boy is as infatuated as everybody else, and Marty finds it easy to suggest that he get hold of the envelope she wants. It is marked "To be handed to my son Ferdinand," and he'll find it in his father's house. Unfortunately Prus has crept back, he sends his son packing and, to a roll from the cymbals, offers to give Marty the envelope that evening.

Act III

The last act is set in Marty's hotel room. Marty is in a magnificent dressing gown, Baron Prus is sitting in an armchair without a collar on (this is 1926 shorthand for telling the audience that the pair have just made love). Baron Prus has been utterly repelled by the experience. "It was like embracing a corpse" he says. He hands over the envelope, feeling he's been cheated. As he does so a chambermaid arrives with a message from his servant: Janek has killed himself, in despair over his hopeless passion. The Baron rushes out, but Marty barely registers the news. She brightens at the appearance of Hauk-Sendorf, who has sold his wife's jewellery and is convinced that he and Marty are about to leave for Spain. She obviously thinks that's rather a good idea - but suddenly the room fills up.

Fraud

Gregor, Kolenatý, Vitek, Kristina, Prus and a doctor enter. The doctor removes Hauk while Kolenatý produces a document, dated 1836, which Marty gave him to prove the parentage of Ferdinand Gregor. It turns out to have been written in modern ink and is thus a forgery.

Investigation

Marty couldn't be bothered to defend herself and the others begin to search her trunks. For a moment a normal human emotion flickers to the surface, and the diva pulls a gun on them, but Gregor knocks it away and she retires, saying she'll answer their questions once she's dressed. The search continues, it's horrible to watch: the characters act as if Marty isn't quite human, and that it's perfectly all right to ransack her belongings. As they do so, it becomes obvious that Emilia Marty has had many pseudonyms, all bearing the letters "E.M." Prus points out that the writing is the always the same, whether it's Elina

Makropulos or Ellian MacGregor. At which point Emilia Marty returns, beautifully dressed and slightly drunk, and wearily tells them the truth.

Crete, 1585

She was born 337 years ago, in Crete, as Elina Makropulos, daughter to Hieronymous Makropulos, a physician to the Emperor Rudolf II. Her father was ordered by his master to develop an elixir of eternal life and the old man came up with a potion that extended life for 300 years. He tried it first on his sixteen-year-old daughter but all she did was fall into a coma and he was imprisoned as an impostor. Shortly afterwards the girl recovered, escaped with the formula, and began her career as an opera singer. Since then she has had many careers, always in the theatre and under different aliases, but keeping the letters E.M. as her initials. At the beginning of the 19th century she gave the formula to her lover Baron Prus, (to whom she bore a son, Ferdinand). However, as the elixir only lasts 300 years, she has spent the last few days trying to recover her father's manuscript. It is of course the mysterious document in the sealed envelope.

Kolenatý doesn't believe any of this, but Marty can scarcely hear him. She begins to recite the opening of the Lord's Prayer in Greek, "Pater hemon..." while Kolenatý hectors her, demanding to know her real name. "Elina Makropulos" she says, and collapses. Everybody realises she must be telling the truth and they carry her away to her bedroom.

The End of a Long Life

There is a brief orchestral interlude, fast and shrill as the piccolos and percussion play, then slow as the violins take over. Emilia Marty re-appears. The men on stage ask her forgiveness but she is beyond human reach. Living and dying are now obviously much the same thing, "one mustn't live so long," she says, "life has no meaning if it goes on too long..." She reads the opening words of the formula, and then gives up. She no longer wants the elixir and hands it on to Kristina: she can live 300 years if she likes, become an opera singer, acquire wealth and fame. Kristina takes the document, and burns it. A red light fills the stage and, singing the words, 'Pater hemon' Marty collapses and dies.

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