

JANUFA by Leos Janacek

Setting: A Moravian village in the nineteenth century

The plot depends on a tangled set of village relationships. Before the opera begins, the mill-owner Grandmother Buryja's two sons have both married, fathered children, and died. The children's mothers have also died, except for Kostelnička, the younger son's second wife and Jenůfa's stepmother. Custom dictates that only Števa, the elder son's biological child, will inherit the mill, leaving his half-brother Laca and cousin Jenůfa to earn their livings.

Act I Jenůfa, Laca, and Grandmother Buryja wait for Števa to return home. Jenůfa, in love with Števa and secretly pregnant with his child, worries that he may have been forced into the army. Laca, in love with Jenůfa, expresses bitterness against his half-brother's favored position at home. As he complains he plays with a knife and, finding it blunt, gives it to the mill foreman to be sharpened.

The foreman tells the family the news that Števa has not been drafted after all, to Jenůfa's relief and Laca's increased frustration. The others leave, and Jenůfa waits by herself to greet Števa. He appears with a group of soldiers, extremely drunk and boasting of his prowess with the girls. He calls for music and drags the miserable Jenůfa into dancing with him.

Kostelnička steps into this rowdy scene, silences the musicians and, shocked by Števa's behavior, forbids him to marry Jenůfa until he can stay sober for one full year. The soldiers and the family leave Števa and Jenůfa alone, and she begs him to love her, but he, unaware of her pregnancy, gives her casual answers and leaves.

Laca returns, as bitter as ever. He attempts to goad Jenůfa into criticizing Števa, but she takes her lover's side despite everything. Laca rages that Števa would never even look at her if it weren't for her rosy cheeks, then slashes her across the cheek with his knife.

Act II Months later, it is winter. The baby has been born, but Števa has not yet come to visit his child. Jenůfa's face is still disfigured, but she is happy in her love for the baby. While Jenůfa sleeps, Kostelnička summons Števa and demands that he take responsibility. He answers that while he will provide money in secret, no one must know the baby is his. His love for Jenůfa died when Laca spoiled her beauty, and he is now engaged to marry Karolka, the mayor's pretty daughter.

Števa leaves, and Laca enters. He still doesn't know the truth about the baby, and when Kostelnička tells him, his first reaction is disgust at the thought of taking Števa's child under his wing. Fearful that Jenůfa will be left with no one to marry, Kostelnička hastily lies that the baby is dead. Laca leaves, and Kostelnička is faced with the necessity of making the lie true. She wraps the baby in a shawl and leaves the house.

Jenůfa wakes up and says a prayer for her child's future, but Kostelnička, returning, tells her that the baby died while she slept. Laca appears and comforts Jenůfa gently, asking that they spend the rest of their lives together. Seeing the tenderness of the couple, Kostelnička tries to convince herself that she has acted for the best.

Act III It is now spring, and Laca and Jenůfa's wedding day. All seems right again, except that Kostelnička is a nervous wreck. Števa and Karolka visit, and a chorus of village girls sings a wedding song. Just then, screams are heard. The body of the baby has been discovered in the mill-stream under the melting ice. Jenůfa immediately says that the baby is hers, and in her grief appears guilty of the murder. The village is ready to exact immediate justice against Jenůfa, but Kostelnička calms

them and says that the crime is hers. Hearing the whole story, Jenůfa forgives her stepmother. The crowd takes Kostelnička off to jail. Jenůfa and Laca are left alone.