



Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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Entitling this record 'Leoš Janáček: complete string quartets', as Audite does, looks rather odd when he wrote only two. The simple explanation is that we have three performances here: the First Quartet ('after L. N. Tolstoy's 'Kreutzer Sonata') and the Second Quartet in two versions, one with the traditional four instruments, the other with viola d'amore replacing the usual viola; but things are a bit more complicated than that.

In 1903, on one of his summer visits to the spa of Luhačovice, Janáček met Kamila Urválková. She had already been the subject of an opera, *Kamilla*, by, so to speak, a previous relationship with another composer, Ludvík Čelanský, in which to her irritation she was portrayed as an air-headed little flirt. The susceptible Janáček was immediately smitten. 'She was one of the most beautiful of women', he declared in his autobiography (from photographs, one can see that he had a point), adding, 'Her voice was like violas d'amore.' He had come upon the viola d'amore in Berlioz's treatise on orchestration, where its tone is described as 'faible et doux', suitable for 'l'expression des sentiments extatiques et religieux', and he had heard it in a work that much influenced him, Charpentier's *Louise*. When he then set to work on a new opera, *Fate*, all about the composition of an opera in a spa, the heroine 'Míla', which also means 'dear', was associated with love music on the instrument (he used it similarly in *Kát'a Kabanová*, and elsewhere, as can be heard in Charles Mackerras's recordings).

So it was primed in his imagination for the association with Kamila Stösslová, another Luhačovice encounter, the muse of his late years and the subject of the Second Quartet. This was originally subtitled on the autograph sketch 'Listy milostné', 'Love letters': only later came the more discreet title 'Listy důvěrné', usually translated as 'Intimate letters' but better really the more elliptical 'Confidential letters'. Originally, the instrument at the centre of the quartet was to be the viola d'amore; but when the Moravian Quartet came to play the work through to Janáček, he was forced to concede that the instrument was impracticable and reluctantly cut it out. As John Tyrrell sagaciously puts it, in a sub-chapter on the viola d'amore in his *Cambridge Opera Handbook on Kát'a Kabanová* (Cambridge; 1982), 'While there is much to be said for authentic recordings with the viola d'amore included ... in general we should regard the instrument as one of the inspirational devices which helped Janáček to compose.'

We live, of course, in an age of 'authenticity', which is also an age of many paradoxes, as when Mackerras candidly admits that with the viola d'amore in *Kát'a*, 'Modern recording ... has made it possible to realise [Janáček's] intention to the letter.' This is less necessary with the string quartet. 'Authenticity' is handsomely served by the viola d'amore player, Gunter Teuffel, using the actual instrument

owned by Rudolf Reissig, who taught at Janáček's Organ Conservatory from 1903 to 1909. Pictures show a beautiful instrument, with a broad belly and bridge to accommodate the seven playing strings as well as the seven resonating strings which provide the characteristic halo of sound. The opening solo, however, is partly inaudible. This makes it odd to have chosen to overshadow it by using the opening chordal theme in the powerful version for bowed strings, rather than the lighter pizzicato (there are other differences, deriving from issues with the manuscript and parts). Pizzicato was used on the only previous record with the viola d'amore, clearly played by John Anthony Calabrese with the Kubin Quartet as part of Volume 4 of the fascinating 'The Unknown Janáček' Supraphon series. Later in the movement on the new recording, the *molto meno mosso* sounds well, and on the penultimate page the *adagio* solo, singing through carefully disposed chords from the other strings, is beautiful. Similarly, the opening solo of the second movement is sweet and clear, the instrument holds its own in the lilting *moderato*, and in the finale adds a fascinating colour to the elaborate textures at the *espresso* section (Fig. 12). There are further complexities of version, it should be added, too complex to be pursued here, as Janáček modified the score. The seriously curious should consult the text published in 2009 as part of the ongoing Janáček Complete Edition.

What of the actual performances? In the First Quartet, the music is very well phrased, with smooth and well-blended tone, though there is some lack of menace, of the sense of living on the edge of an abyss in this reflection of Tolstoy's threatening story. Emotions that are barely controlled can sound too controlled here, and it is part of Janáček's idiom for there to be sudden outbursts that are far from tame. A comparable smoothness marks the playing in the Second Quartet, a sense of emotions running easily and comfortably rather than with such urgency that they have to be held fiercely in check, which is part of the whole situation that led to Janáček composing the work as he did. There are stronger, more urgent performances from the Skampa and Panocha Quartets, not to mention the classic old version by the Talich Quartet, and indeed the excellent Janáček Quartet. Yet for Janáček collectors, this is of course an enthralling disc, and one to engage the attention of anyone gripped by the passionate, even violent interactions of Janáček's life and his music.