



Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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Complete string quartets? Janáček left us just two, but this new release commands attention with a reconstruction of the Second Quartet in its original form, complete with viola d'amore. Both works can make for painfully intense listening, dating from Janáček's amazingly creative final period, where he produced a series of staggeringly original and quirky works. The 1923 First Quartet, subtitled The Kreutzer Sonata after Tolstoy's disturbing novella, always sounds to me like a succession of sighs, swoons and gasps, of short, choppy phrases and mercurial mood changes. It's remarkable to hear Janáček's free avoidance of conventional classical forms; themes recur unexpectedly, tension rises and ebbs, and after some passionate sparring in the last movement the music just stops enigmatically.

The Second Quartet, better known as Intimate Letters, is an explicit declaration of love to Janáček's much younger mistress, composed over a three-week period in 1928. His original scoring rather appropriately included a viola d'amore, an archaic seven-stringed viola variant with sympathetic strings under the fingerboard, vibrating with each bowed note. Janáček's original viola player found the instrument too difficult to manage, so the quartet was revised for conventional viola. "So I had to cut the viola d'amore, but it was awful" was Janáček's comment after revising the work. Gunter Teuffel's edition is based on surviving original scores, and the tone of the viola d'amore is immediately apparent when the two versions are compared. There are several other changes too, notably the original pizzicato opening to the first movement, better matched to the softer, veiled tone of the viola d'amore solo. This issue is more than a fascinating curiosity, with the Mandelring Quartet fully at ease with the technical demands of both quartets. There's a magical largamente climax in the middle of the Second Quartet's third movement and it sounds stunning here – an explicit declaration of love, the first violin singing out in the upper register. Both works are masterpieces, and I envy anyone hearing them for the first time.