



Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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Amazht have for Janáček-fans and chamber music aficionados

Leoš Janáček is a unique phenomenon in the history of classical music. He was born in humble surroundings in 1854 in the small Moravian town of Hukvaldy. After his studies he became the head of his own music school in the town of Brno. Until 1895 he devoted himself mainly to folkloristic research. His early musical output was unremarkable and influenced by contemporaries such as Antonín Dvořák. His later, mature works incorporate his earlier studies of national folk music in a modern, highly original synthesis. This was first evident in the opera *Jenufa*, which was premiered in 1904 in Brno. In the year 1916, at age 62, *Jenufa* was performed to great acclaim in Prague. When *Jenufa* was staged in the opera-houses of Vienna (1918) and Berlin (1924), he finally achieved international recognition. In the eight years before his death at age 74, he astonished the musical world by completing five more operas.

In the summer of 1917, while on holiday at his beloved spa Lucacovice, he met a beautiful woman half his age, with whom he fell madly in love. A love-affair never materialized, but she was to remain the object of his affection for the rest of his days. While staying faithful to her husband and children, Kamila Stösslova maintained an extensive correspondence with the aging composer. Some six hundred letters that Janáček wrote to her have been preserved and published, and a large number of his works are dedicated to her. The inspiration Janáček found in his love for Kamila not only prompted him to compose five operas, but also made him turn to the more intimate medium of chamber music. In his final years he wrote a string quartet, violin sonata, wind quintet, the *Concertino* for piano, the *Capriccio* for left hand piano, and his last completed instrumental composition, the second string quartet of 1928.

Both string quartets are dedicated to Kamila Stösslova, and both have nicknames. The first is called 'Kreutzer Sonata' after the Tolstoy novel, which refers to Beethoven's Violin sonata of the same name. Janáček called his second quartet 'Intimate Letters', and in a letter to Kamila we read: 'today, it's Sunday, I'm especially sad. I've begun work on a quartet; I'll give it the name Love Letters'. Each movement evokes a certain point in their relationship, and when the quartet was near its premiere he wrote that 'you stand behind every note, you, living, forceful, loving. The fragrance of your body, the glow of your kisses - no, really of mine. Those notes of mine kiss all of you. They call for you passionately'.

To symbolize that love, Janáček chose an instrument that embodies the feminine form both in sound and appearance: the viola d'amore. The viola d'amore is part of the old viol family; it has seven strings plus five resonating strings. The tuning is based on a major triad, not on fifths like the violin. It was very popular in the baroque era, and Antonio Vivaldi wrote several concertos for the instrument. When the viol family was replaced by the modern violin, viola and cello, the viola d'amore lay dormant for several centuries. In the twentieth century, with its renewed interest in old music and instruments, it came to life again. Paul Hindemith, among others, was responsible for resurrecting its use. Janáček fell in love with its sound and used it in his opera *Katya Kabanova*, another work that was dedicated to Kamila. When he started his second quartet, he decided that he would substitute the viola with a viola d'amore. The viola d'amore has one severe drawback: the sound that it produces is very delicate and soft, and there is no way that it can compete with the much more forceful violin and cello - even when played on gut strings. Janáček abandoned the idea and reverted to the normal viola. Unfortunately an original score has not been preserved.

The Mandelring Quartet asked viola d'amore player Gunter Teuffel to make a reconstruction of Janáček's original ideas. Teuffel worked out a performance version in which the viola d'amore is reinstated. In a very thorough and elaborate text in the booklet, he explains his decisions. Better yet, the label Audite has provided us with a video that has been published on youtube. In this clip Teuffel explains the way the instrument is built and played, and together with the other members of the quartet he plays important excerpts from the score. He tells us (in German) that the other players are holding back, but to tell the truth, what we hear is a full-blown string quartet. One must assume that the recording technician helped a little in redressing the balance.

Audite presents two recordings of the second quartet, first the published version, and next the reconstruction. An ear-catching difference occurs in the very opening, where the full chords in first and second violin are delivered pizzicato, not arco. This creates space for the fragile sound of the viola d'amore to blossom. To detect most of the other changes one really needs a score - available free of charge in the Petrucci library on the internet. In the video we notice that on the last page of the score it is not the first violin, but the viola d'amore that delivers the high embellished notes that float over the whipping chords of the other instruments.

The Mandelring Quartet consists of three siblings: Sebastian Schmidt leads, his sister Nanette plays second violin, and brother Bernhard cello. Roland Glassl is the viola player. They record exclusively for the label Audite and have won praise for their award-winning issue of the complete string quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich. Musicianship is impeccable and intonation is spot-on. The rough-and-ready attack that mars so many recordings of these very orchestrally conceived scores is fortunately missing. The large helping of general pauses in these pages can turn tricky, but here they are realized to perfection.

The recording is exemplary. The position of each player is defined very precisely, which is something that really matters in the case of the reconstructed Second Quartet. The viola d'amore is placed slightly to the right of centre, and can be followed very easily. This is a must-have for Janáček-fans and chamber music aficionados alike.