Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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Leoš Janácek (1854–1928) was in many ways a unique composer. He was profoundly influenced by the Moravian folk music and the speech patterns of the Czech language, especially the dialect of his native region, and even his instrumental works have a “spoken” quality. Indeed, his music has a highly personal character that makes it daunting to perform and helps explain why he did not gain international recognition until well beyond middle age. His two string quartets are among the most difficult in the literature. The best players call them virtually unplayable, and their individualistic musical and emotional language test the performers’ flexibility and empathy to the utmost.

Among the great Czech quartets, this recording by the Mandelrings—Sebastian and Nanette Schmidt, violins; Roland Glassl, viola; Bernhard Schmidt, cello; and Gunter Teuffel, viola d’amore—is one of the best. The players’ tone is rich and warm. The balance is exemplary, the texture clear; lines stand out and interweave in a colorful tapestry. They enter into all the changes of mood and expression: the melodies melt with tenderness and sorrow, the dances leap boisterously

Janá?ek’s life and work were closely intertwined: he wrote all his late compositions for the young woman who had become his muse. In the Second Quartet, “Intimate Letters,” the viola part was originally written for viola d’amore (the instrument of love), but finding a player for it proved to be so difficult that Janá?ek rewrote it for viola. This recording presents both versions, a most interesting idea: the d’amore’s mellow sound and Baroque inflections underline the music’s tender, pleading intimacy.

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