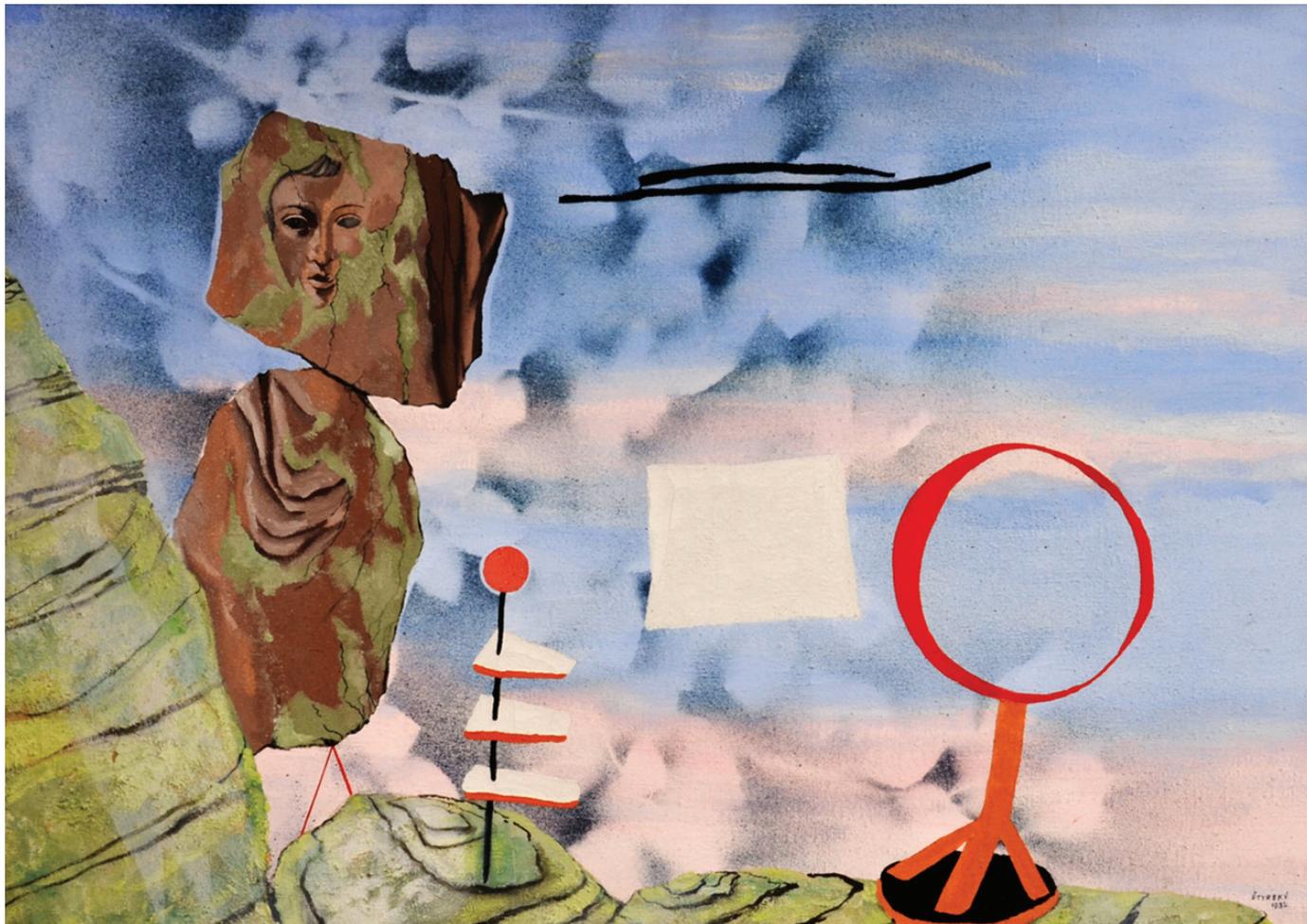




# JANÁČEK

String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2 • Sonnets

New Zealand String Quartet



## Leoš Janáček (1854–1928)

### String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2 • Sonnets, JW VII/1 and 2

Chamber music features prominently in the output of Leoš Janáček, though this is irregularly spaced over the course of his career. The composer wrote several such works while studying at Leipzig and Vienna during 1879–81, including a violin sonata and a string quartet, but no larger pieces appear to have survived. The period 1904 to 1916 – between the premiere of his opera *Jenůfa* in the composer's native Brno and triumphant staging in the (soon to be Czech capital) Prague – was a difficult time personally and professionally; not least as the ever more individual qualities of Janáček's idiom was causing uncertainty on the part of audiences and, most likely, for the composer himself. Little wonder the chamber works that emerged during the period, *Pohádka* ('Fairy Tale') for cello and piano (Naxos 8.553895) and the *Violin Sonata* (8.553588), were both subject to substantial revision before reaching their definitive form in the early 1920s. Not so those pieces that emerged during his final decade, themselves part of a veritable explosion of activity which saw the final four of his nine operas along with the *Sinfonietta* (8.550411), *Glagolitic Mass* (8.572639) and several works for varying ensembles – including the wind sextet *Mládi* ('Youth') [8.554173]. These all bear witness to the intensity of his creative renewal, among them the two string quartets that emerged during this period.

Although written to a commission from the Czech (formerly the Bohemian) Quartet – whose second violinist was composer Josef Suk – Janáček's *First Quartet* had its origins in a piano trio completed around 1909 and heard in public before subsequently being destroyed (though this has more recently been reconstructed and performed). To what extent the material of this trio was transferred directly to the quartet cannot be exactly determined, but both pieces take their inspiration from Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* with its narrative of failed marriage, passion, and adultery – culminating in the heroine's murder by her jealous husband – set against the background of Beethoven's famous violin sonata. Janáček does not attempt to follow

the storyline literally; rather, the elements of heightened and conflicting emotion are present in all four movements – each of which forms a mosaic-like part of the whole, which is itself unified by a number of motifs that have a cyclic function over the course of the work.

The first movement commences with a sighing motif, heard across the ensemble, which duly permeates the composition and is complemented by vigorous solo gestures. As is customary in Janáček's late work, the music does not so much develop as intensify through a reiteration of its salient motifs – with 'classical' formal structures being hinted at rather than followed through. The second movement contrasts a robust gesture with a malevolent one played *sul ponticello*, this alternation of 'positive' and 'negative' forces making for a potent discourse. By contrast, the third movement pits a wistfully undulating motif against its more aggressive equivalent – the disparity between the two growing as the music unfolds. Powerful as these movements are, they are on one level merely the preparation for a finale which ranks among Janáček's finest creations. From its subdued beginning, the 'sighing motif' much in evidence, this movement builds as a free fantasia through passages of mounting tension – accumulated momentum eventually exploding in an outburst of frenzied passion before at length subsiding in a mood of bitter resignation, the 'sighing motif' duly bringing the work fatefully full circle.

The *First Quartet* was first performed on 14 October 1924. Almost four years later, on 11 September 1928, the Moravian Quartet gave the posthumous premiere (the composer having died on August 12) of its successor. Subtitled 'Intimate Letters', this *Second Quartet* is the sublimation of Janáček's love for Kamila Stösslová – the wife of a family friend and 38 years his junior, whose bemused disinterest in her admirer was inspiration enough for Janáček right through his last decade. As if to underline the feelings evoked, the work was conceived with the viola replaced by the deeper tone of the viola d'amore, but the scarcity of that instrument and intonational difficulties of

integrating it into the standard ensemble led the composer to abandon this idea (though in recent years the piece has been successfully played in this guise).

On a slightly larger scale than its predecessor, the *Second Quartet* further extends the notion of four, freely evolving movements brought together in an overall design of tight yet elusive unity. Thus the first movement contrasts its brusque initial gesture with one more restrained in dynamics and expression, the music duly heading into an energetic passage that opens out onto a theme of real pathos, before surging towards a climax of repeated chords and a decisive coda. The second movement opens in a mood of tangible yearning, then builds to an intense central apex before taking on dance-like elements over its vehement and unpredictable latter half. By contrast, the third movement starts out in the manner of a lullaby – its central section taken up by a theme stated in respectively calm and ecstatic guises, with this latter presaging an intense activity that gradually works its way back to a return of the 'lullaby'. The finale is launched with a vigorous, folk-inflected idea that returns almost as a refrain between episodes of often disparate motion. Towards its midpoint a suave theme tentatively emerges, only to be twice confronted by an eruptive outburst that brings about the return of the vigorous initial idea – to be followed by a conclusion that confirms the work's overall mood of defiant affirmation.

Janáček's output from the 1870s – at least as it has come down to us – is dominated by works for chorus and string orchestra (notably the *Suite* and *Idyll*), though there is also a handful for chamber forces. Two of the earliest are a brace of pieces called *Sonnet*, which were composed around 1875 and each scored for four violins. Both seem to have emerged towards the end of Janáček's two years of study at the Prague Organ School, a fraught yet ultimately successful period during which the foundations of his musical and ethical convictions were established.

As befits their title, whose meaning is derived from the Italian for 'a little sound or song', the two pieces are modest in formal and expressive scope while being perfectly realised for their medium (and which is no less applicable to these transcriptions for string quartet). The *First Sonnet* evinces an archaic, even ecclesiastical aura by dint of its modal harmonies and evenly spaced part-writing. By contrast, the *Second Sonnet* begins with an unaccompanied melodic phrase on violin to which the remaining instruments respond in an alternation between solo and ensemble which, together with the liltily expressive harmonies, makes it sound more audibly of its time. The manuscript of this latter piece has only come down in an incomplete state but the discreet tailing off at its close still makes for a more than satisfactory conclusion.

Richard Whitehouse

### **New Zealand String Quartet**

**Helene Pohl, Violin I • Monique Lapins, Violin II • Gillian Ansell, Viola • Rolf Gjelsten, Cello**



Since 1987 the New Zealand String Quartet (NZSQ) has been New Zealand's leading chamber ensemble, with a distinguished record of international touring success and a body of acclaimed recordings. Much loved by audiences at home and around the world, the Quartet performs over 80 concerts to popular and critical acclaim each year. Career highlights have included highly praised performances at London's Wigmore Hall, The Frick Collection in New York and the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. The Quartet's extensive discography includes works by Brahms, Mendelssohn, Bartók, Ravel, Debussy, Beethoven, Schubert, Dvořák, Wolf, Berg, Takemitsu, Tan Dun and numerous New Zealand composers, including the complete chamber works for strings by Douglas Lilburn. The NZSQ has released three-album sets of both Brahms and Mendelssohn chamber music works for Naxos. The ensemble has been quartet-in-residence at the New Zealand School of Music at Victoria University of Wellington since 1991, where three of the members are associate professors. Violinist Helene Pohl and violist Gillian Ansell are co-artistic directors of the biennial Adam Chamber Music Festival in Nelson and the longest-serving Quartet members have been awarded the Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) honour for services to music in New Zealand. [www.nzsq.org.nz](http://www.nzsq.org.nz)

Janáček's final decade saw an almost unprecedented creative renewal during which he wrote some of his greatest works. Among them were his chamber music masterpieces, the two *String Quartets*. The first was inspired by Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a torrid tale of adultery and murder to which Janáček responded with music of increasingly frenzied passion. The second was subtitled *Intimate Letters*, a freely evolving work full of yearning and amorous defiance. Originally cast for four violins, the two youthful *Sonnets* date from 1875 and balance the archaisms of the first with the lyricism of the second.

Leoš  
**JANÁČEK**  
(1854–1928)

- String Quartet No. 1, JW VII/8 'Kreutzer Sonata' (1923) 17:36**
- 1 **I. Adagio – Con moto** 4:02 2 **II. Con moto** 4:17  
3 **III. Con moto – Vivo – Andante** 4:02 4 **IV. Con moto** 5:13
- String Quartet No. 2, JW VII/13 'Listy důvěrné' (1928) 25:39**  
(*'Intimate Letters'*)
- 5 **I. Andante** 5:57 6 **II. Adagio** 5:53  
7 **III. Moderato** 5:32 8 **IV. Allegro** 8:14
- 9 **Znělka ('Sonnet') in D minor, JW VII/2**  
(arr. Rolf Gjelsten, b. 1955, for string quartet) (1875)\* **2:27**
- 10 **Znělka ('Sonnet') in A major, JW VII/1**  
(arr. Rolf Gjelsten for string quartet) (1875)\* **2:22**

**\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

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