



Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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[Fanfare](#) (Paul Orgel - 01.05.2011)

Using short, potent motives, Janáček's two string quartets communicate emotional states—foreboding, frenzied activity, anguish, and breakdown, along with moments of sweetness, nostalgia, and occasional ecstasy—with the same dramatic intensity as his operas. Both quartets share melodic material with *Káťa Kabanová* (1921) and the first quartet, the “Kreutzer Sonata” from 1923, based on Tolstoy, shares its Russian setting and the theme of the mistreatment of its heroine.

In the even less musically conventional second quartet, “Intimate Letters” from 1928, the “hero” is Janáček himself, expressing his unreturned passion for Kamila Stössel. Decades ago, these pieces were off the beaten path, with older Czech quartets offering the most fully realized performances. Now, like Janáček's piano music and violin sonata, they are mainstream repertoire, recorded by many international quartets, though still a specialty of the best, newer Czech groups like the Talich, Prazák, Skámpa, Panocha, and Pavel Haas quartets.

The Mandelring Quartet, a young German quartet, plays them with near-perfect intonation, razor-sharp articulation, and very precise ensemble in these highly recommendable performances. Their playing is showcased by the very vivid sound of Audite's SACD recording in which the miking pinpoints the exact location of each player. A perfectly adequate version by the Vlach quartet on Naxos seems lackluster after hearing the Mandelring disc with its superior recorded sound and string playing with technique to spare. The older, venerable Smetana Quartet seems restrained by comparison. My favorite recording, by the Janáček Quartet, offers something less overwrought than the edgy, modern norm in these pieces, more sense of dialogue between the instruments and of space between events.

Along with its extraordinary recorded sound, the Mandelring's disc stands out among a surplus of excellent versions of these works for including an alternate version of the second quartet. Janáček originally scored “Intimate Letters” for viola d'amore in place of the standard viola, and here, violist Gunter Teuffel performs on the actual instrument that Janáček knew—it belonged to Rudolf Reissig, a violin professor at the Brno Organ School from 1903 to 1909—in a reconstructed version of the quartet.

Aside from an obvious change in which the first movement opens with pizzicato instead of arco playing from the violins, the revisions are hard to hear. What's fascinating is how the gentler timbre of the viola d'amore, often the work's melodic protagonist, sweetens the tone of Janáček declarations of love. The other instruments react with adjustments to their volume and the general effect is less fierce than with the more projected voice of the normal viola. If you love this piece, the viola d'amore version gives insight into what Janáček imagined, but it's very

subtle and I wouldn't call it a revelation.

I recently attended an excellent concert by the French Diotima Quartet in which "Intimate Letters" was programmed together with Alban Berg's 1925–26 Lyric Suite, a pairing that makes great sense since the two works are roughly contemporaneous and both have secret romantic dedications. Seeing these two dynamic pieces by two master opera composers performed made them more exciting and accessible than any recording. The Diotima has recorded both versions of "Intimate Letters."

