



Leoš Janáček: Complete String Quartets

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In the 1970s, when I was researching a monograph on Czech viola players, I discovered that, contrary to received opinion, the viola d'amore had never died out. Several musicians played it in Prague and Brno in Janáček's time, including Rudolf Reissig (1874-1939), whose instrument is used by Gunter Teuffel in this recording. Janáček certainly knew what the viola d'amore sounded like, although his motivation for using it in several late works was its name. When he chose it for his Second Quartet in place of a viola da braccio, he was unaware that the Viennese composer Karl Weigl had done the same thing 25 years earlier (the writer of the main booklet note is also unaware of it and repeats the nonsense that Hindemith rediscovered the viola d'amore). The viola player of the Moravian Quartet, Josef Trkan, gamely tried to rehearse Intimate Letters using a viola d'amore but the balance was all awry and the attempt was abandoned. Janáček revised the work, adjusting those passages written for seven strings; but a recording can achieve a just balance.

This is at least the third recording of the restored original version. The 1997 disc by Kubín Quartet members and the American John Calabrese (Supraphon SU3349-2) and the 2008 disc by Quatuor Diotima members and Garth Knox (Alpha 133) use the edition prepared by four Czech scholars and now published by Bärenreiter. Teuffel has consulted Dr Milan Škampa of the Smetana Quartet and leading authority on Janáček's quartets, who has material not available to the Bärenreiter team. The result sounds authoritative to me and although you pick up the wirier sound of the viola d'amore, you hardly notice that the viola part is being played by a less voluminous instrument than usual. What you do notice, straight away, in both Bärenreiter and this even newer edition, is that the main theme is hammered out pizzicato at the start – Janáček's revision is much better here. I have not heard the Alpha CD but the Supraphon is very well played, albeit recorded more distantly and resonantly, and the three-quarters Czech ensemble moves more naturally at times, especially in the nostalgic main theme of the Moderato where the Germans are slightly stiff and self-conscious.

The Mandelring Quartet plays extremely well in the Kreutzer Sonata and the normal version of Intimate Letters. My only nagging doubt is crystallised once again by that Moderato theme: the Germans have prepared the music meticulously but the syntax is not as familiar to them as to the best Czech ensembles. They are superbly recorded, quite close up but not claustrophobically so, and the disc can heartily be recommended to the curious, as I feel these players have the edge with their newly prepared edition of the original Intimate Letters.