

Intimate Voices: The Edinburgh Quartet launches its new season



Anyone who thinks classical composers lead dull lives should take a look at **Leos Janacek**. He was temporarily expelled from the Prague Organ School, his marriage to his boss's daughter (he was over 30, she just 15 years of age) was one of the stormiest on record, he had numerous affairs and spent the last eleven years of his life obsessed with a married woman 38 years his junior. One wonders how he had time to produce any music at all – but his output was prolific. He named his second string quartet (completed in 1928 – the year of his death) *Intimate Letters*, and indeed he wrote to **Kamila Stosslova**, the object of his affections, almost every day until he died. Last week at St Andrew's & St George's West Church, **The Edinburgh Quartet** opened its new season with a brilliant interpretation of this work, a piece inspired by the woman who 'unleashed a creativity that burned within him'.



Violinist **Tristan Gurney** introduced the evening. The Quartet has decided to take a new path this autumn; its season will be split into three mini-series and each will aim to define what is special about chamber music groups – especially this one. When Tristan and fellow musicians **Gordon Bragg** (*violin/piano*), **Fiona Winning** (*viola*) and **Mark Bailey** (*cello*) (right), discussed the particular nature of string quartets, the recurrent theme was *intimacy*; for the composers, quartets are often personal outpourings, 'exploring the depths of their soul', while for the performers, quartets create – and need – an intimate and intuitive relationship. Quartets tend to play

in intimate surroundings – and all this intimacy develops a closeness between performers and audience, something very much in evidence at this concert. *Intimate Voices*, the Quartet's autumn project, will focus on works with intimate expression at their core (other sessions will include **Sibelius'** masterwork *Voces Intimae* and **Shostakovich's** *String Quartet No 7*).



Intimate Letters is, Tristan said, 'so extraordinary and radical', that a little bit of musical history is needed to explain its roots. Early in his career Janacek studied with **Dvorak**, and the concert opened with an uplifting waltz (op 54 No 1) by the Czech composer, a work that the Quartet seemed to enjoy as much as the audience. This was followed by Janacek's own early *Romance for a Violin and Piano*, a tender piece with a poignant close. At a recent family concert in Stirling, a little girl had commented that the *Romance* made her 'feel like a princess' – the perfect response to this sometimes ethereal, floaty arrangement.



Janacek's music is intense and powerful. The four movements of *Intimate Letters* are short, exhilarating and challenging for performers and audience alike. Enter, in a genius stroke of programming, former Edinburgh Makar **Ron Butlin**; between each movement Ron told us a little about the composer's life, specifically events surrounding the composition of this quartet, and read most movingly from his letters. Janacek's marriage, Ron said, was 'like a conflict zone'; unsurprisingly, his young wife **Zdenka** didn't approve of his many affairs, but when Kamila came on the scene Zdenka saw in this 'gypsy-like, buxom woman' – a woman totally unimpressed with his fame – 'a fire that lit him in the last few years of his life'. Zdenka felt she had no option but to accept the liaison, such as it was – for Kamila was not that taken with

the 61 year old Janacek, and not only didn't reply to his letters but probably didn't even read most of them. Ron: 'So far as music is concerned, it's probably just as well this relationship never went anywhere'.



Janacek and Zdenka



Janacek and Kamila

The quartet opens with ferocious playing from the violins and a tiny reply from the viola (which instrument is said to represent Kamila). The tempo changes almost from note to note as Janacek expresses his feelings on first meeting Kamila, 'the mystery' said Ron, 'of an encounter with something new...a piece written in fire'. In the second movement, the composer goes as far as to imagine the son he might have had with Kamila;

'I write in musical tones my sweetest desire... Oh, just as you are laughing with tears in your eyes, that is how it sounds'.

The music rises to a euphoric crescendo then stops almost in mid-air.

Janacek wrote that he wanted the quartet's third movement to sound particularly joyful, then 'dissolve into a vision of you'. Here the relentless strumming of the cello and viola suggests, perhaps, the earth that seemed to Janacek to tremble


under his feet whenever he was with Kamila, whilst the fast, high notes of the violins reflect the excitement in his heart.



In the end, Janacek knew that Kamila would always be beyond his embrace; the final movement of the quartet celebrates Kamila's peasant roots, but also seems to come to terms with her inaccessibility. Whether Janacek still hoped to be united with his muse will never be known; once he had completed the piece, he invited her to his country retreat only to find her husband David and younger son Otto tagging along too. When Otto got lost on a walk Janacek went out to look for him and ended up with pneumonia, from which he died on 12th August 1928, with Kamila at his side;

'And I kissed you, and you are sitting beside me and I am at peace. In such a way do the days pass for the angels'.

The technical skill and expertise of the Edinburgh Quartet are outstanding, but for me what made this evening especially enjoyable was its members' passionate playing and their warm engagement with the audience; a truly intimate experience and a wonderful collaboration with Ron Butlin, one of Edinburgh's great people of letters.

Intimate Voices, the **Edinburgh Quartet's** next Edinburgh  performance in this series, will take place at 7.30pm on Wednesday 11th November at **The Queen's Hall**, Clerk Street, when the programme will consist of **Schubert String Quartet No 10 in E flat**, **Shostakovich String Quartet No 7** and **Sibelius String Quartet 'Voces Intimae'**. Tickets cost £15/£12/£5 and are available from The Queen's Hall Box Office. The Edinburgh Quartet will also give a free lunchtime concert at the **City of Edinburgh Methodist Hall**, Nicolson Square at 1.10pm on Tuesday 10th November 2015. The second part of the season, **Storm and Stress**, will look at the 18th century German *Sturm und Drang*

movement, and the third, *New Horizons*, will focus on composers at points of departure, or venturing into new territory.



Image of Janacek's memorial at Brno (c) Jarda 75.

Photos courtesy of Krys Hawryszczuk