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**West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021**

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## **Bantry and Beyond**

***Festival Echoes***

### **19. Intimate Letters**

Filmed at the Cermak Eisenkraft Gallery, SmetanaQ, Prague

**Pavel Haas Quartet**

**Veronika Jarůšková, Marek Zwiebel** [violins]

**Luosha Fang** [viola]

**Peter Jarůšek** [cello]

**Schulhoff**

*Quartet No.1*

**Martinů**

*Quartet No.2*

**Janáček**

*Quartet No.2 'Intimate Letters'*

**Ervín Schulhoff** [1894-1942]

***String Quartet No.1*** [1924]

1. *Presto con fuoco*
2. *Allegretto con moto e con malincolia grottesca*
3. *Allegro giocoso, alla Slovaca*
4. *Andante molto sostenuto*

Throughout history composers have had many obstacles to overcome, most often a deadly combination of indifference and poverty. To this the dictators of the twentieth century, in tacit admission of the power of music, added the lethal weapon of simply forbidding the music of those it found politically undesirable. The Nazis were typically straightforward and just banned all music written by Jewish composers including those long gone like Mahler and Mendelssohn. It was known as *Entartete Musik* [Forbidden music] and these composers found it impossible to publish their works unless they fled to the West. Even now works by composers like Schulhoff, Haas, Klein, Krasa and Ullmann remain unpublished and hard to track down.

Schulhoff was born into a prosperous and cultured Jewish family, and quickly emerged as something of a child prodigy. When Dvořák heard him perform on the piano in 1901, he predicted a great musical future for him. His teachers included both Max Reger and Claude Debussy. As he entered his twenties, he displayed enormous talent in both performance and composition. A Prague critic said he was *a distinguished virtuoso pianist, especially bred for new music, with a splendid technique, unequalled memory and radical interpretational will; a revolutionary composer, with both feet firmly planted on the ground.*

The young musician spent the war in the army of the doomed Austro-Hungarian Empire, and emerged from this experience embittered and radicalized, as did so much of his generation. In January 1919, he moved to Dresden, and he spent the next four years in Germany. Schulhoff turned away from traditional musical forms, associating them with the decadence of the old order that had led to the catastrophe of world war. He briefly embraced Dadaism, but soon distanced himself from its more nihilistic expressions. His friends and associates included the artist George Grosz, with whom he shared his enthusiasm for jazz and ragtime.

During these years, Schulhoff plunged into the music of his time. He was influenced by and often performed the music of various contemporary schools, including the atonality of Schoenberg and Alban Berg (with whom he corresponded) and the neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Hindemith. Other influences included Bartók and Janáček.

A contemporary critic wrote approvingly about his First Quartet. *The string quartet, a fiery outburst of temperament, is made all of a piece, and one has the feeling that the composer's pen could hardly keep pace with his inspiration, though this is in no way to decry the quality of the invention and its intellectual elaboration. But I defy anyone, (with the possible exception of Hindemith) to equal him in the tempestuous pace of the first movement, and its natural musicality, its clarity and its homophony. A catchy melody with simple accompaniment, which*

*often flows along in stereotyped figures, characterizes the next movement, while the third arouses rhythmic interest with a playful Slovak theme and presents the appearance of folk music. All three movements are fast moving. Not until the last section does an Andante-like passage, where the accompaniment mimics the earlier Allegretto melody, introduce a sensitive and contemplative mood, at the close of an otherwise boisterous and cheeky piece of writing.*

Erich Steinhard 1927

Francis Humphrys

## Bohuslav Martinů [1890-1959]

### **String Quartet No. 2** [1925]

1. Moderato, Allegro Vivace
2. Andante
3. Allegro

*It is hard for me to express the happiness I feel when I start composing chamber music – the delight of leading the four voices ... in a quartet one feels at home, intimate, happy.*

Martinů's second published quartet was written in his hometown of Polička, just on the Bohemian side of the Bohemian-Moravian border, only 40 or so miles north of Brno where Pavel Haas was busy writing his second quartet during the same summer. Martinů's beginnings were humble – for his first twelve years the family lived at the top of the church tower, where his father combined his cobbler's trade with fire-watching and ringing bells for services. At seven he began violin lessons and progressed rapidly, soon playing first violin in the Polička string quartet and composing his first piece (a quartet) at eight.

Successful solo recitals when he was fifteen encouraged the local community to raise funds for him to attend the Prague Conservatory – he gained entry in 1906 but his time there was not a success. A record of poor attendance and suspension led eventually to his being dismissed in 1910 for *incorrigible negligence*, although he was clearly inspired by the city's cultural life in which he became involved, importantly befriending the violinist Stanislav Novák, who was to become his closest friend.

Following his expulsion from the Conservatory Martinů began his first period of sustained composition, and, to support himself he took the state teaching exam in 1911, which he failed, passing it however the following year. Violin lessons sustained him throughout the First World War – he escaped conscription, unlike Haas, due to ill-health (some of it fictional). He continued to compose steadily, and in 1919 after six years of occasional deputising as second violin with the Czech Philharmonic he travelled with them on tour to Western Europe. He was enchanted by Paris, and returned there in 1923 to study with the aid of a small scholarship, residing there until the city's fall in 1940.

The second quartet, written during a visit home, is dedicated to the short-lived Novak-Frank Quartet (founded by his dear friend) who premièred the work at their first ever performance, in Prague. The critics were impressed – *they were brilliant in a rhythmically*

*swift quartet by Bohuslav Martinů whose work proved him to be the heir of Dvořák's vigour.* The deceptive opening bars of the first movement could almost come from the Baroque era, but its steady flowering opens up to a colourful *Allegro vivace* which, while very much based on the opening bars, proves itself a veritable romp much more suited to the times. The Andante opens on a contrasting stillness with much slower harmonic movement, the textural focus instead leading us through dark extended melodies in the lower registers. The final movement returns to the carefree buoyancy of the first, an underlying polka beat celebrating his Czech background.

*Nicola Ffrench Davis*

## **Leos Janáček [1854-1928]**

### ***Quartet No.2 'Intimate Letters'* [1928]**

1. *Andante*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Moderato*
4. *Allegro*

*His music is a breathtakingly close confrontation between tenderness and brutality, madness and peacefulness; it condenses the whole of life, with its hell and its paradise.* Milan Kundera on Leos Janáček.

The Second Quartet invites us into the intimacy of the seventy-year-old composer's relationship with Kamila Stösslova. He interrupted his work on *From the House of the Dead* for three weeks to write this erotic celebration of love. It is a daring work in many ways, not least in his experiments with different timbre, particularly with tremolo and *sul ponticello*. He replaces strict formal models with a structure of momentum and suspension; traditional development is taken over by swirling juxtapositions of themes representing dramatically contrasted moods. Also he frequently resorts to popular dance elements to make his point.

The music bursts into flames from the first bar, a passionate theme, which will recur throughout the four movements. *My feelings when I saw you for the first time*, wrote Janáček to Kamila. The first eight bars give way to a viola solo played *sul ponticello*; Janáček had for a time been obsessed with replacing the viola with a viola d'amore, seemingly attracted by the name of the instrument as much as its sound. The *sul ponticello* effect was his superb solution and quartet violists have been saved from the ignominy of being replaced by a baroque instrument.

*Today I set to music my tenderest desire. I fought with it. It prevailed. It was like a birth. What would the destiny of this son have been – simply as we are, passing from tears to laughter?* The viola opens the extraordinary second movement with a gentle lullaby theme, which slowly expands into music of extreme exaltation. This is eventually interrupted by a few short scales descending *flautato*, which usher in a presto with a popular dance theme, before bringing back the viola theme from the first movement. The *flautato* scales are then

used again to signal the reappearance of these various ideas before the movement ends suddenly.

*Today I wrote the number where the earth trembles. It will be the best.* The third movement begins with a swaying barcarole. The central adagio section shifts to mysterious harmonies played very softly; a magnificent contrast occurs when the same music returns fortissimo, played by the violin at full stretch, and transfigured by a C major chord. The barcarole is brought back at several different tempos and there is a reminder of the mysterious central adagio before the movement ends suddenly with three cries. The last movement follows immediately, a rondo with a spirited dance refrain. The first episode again recalls the work's opening theme in four trilled notes. The second episode is played andante, and again calls up the four-note theme, *furioso sul ponticello*. The momentum is built up before an abrupt close.

*Francis Humphrys*

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