Janácek Quartet Number One “Kreutzer Sonata”

Rudolph Kreutzer, a passing acquaintance of Beethoven, was an outstanding nineteenth century violinist whose name has survived for over a century as the second dedicatee of Beethoven’s ninth Sonata for Piano and Violin, Opus 47. Ironically, Kreutzer never performed the sonata, considering it “outrageously unintelligible.” The premier of Beethoven’s work was in 1803. It was performed by the mulatto violinist George Bridgetower, the original dedicatee deleted by the composer because of Bridgetower’s “insulting the morals of a woman whom Beethoven cherished.” In fact, Beethoven cherished a lot of women, and proposed unsuccessfully to approximately sixteen!

Leo Tolstoy perpetuated the name in a novella published in 1889, titled *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which was censored by the Russian authorities. In the novella, the central character, Pozdnyshev has a pianist wife, who is unfaithful to him, specifically with a violinist…and these two like to play the Kreutzer sonata together. A beautiful painting (1901) by Rene Prinet displays the lovers kissing during a “musical moment.” (See Wikimedia Commons) In a rage, Pozdnyshev eventually stabs his wife to death: ignited in his jealously by a performance of the Kreutzer sonata and ignited in his fury over the “swinish excesses” involved in the affair, and overall the “swinish connection”

in sexual relations between men and women. (He was ultimately acquitted of guilt.)

Janácek was taken by the story, enough so to write three works referencing the novella: a Piano trio (1908) and three movements of a string quartet (1880.) Both of these are lost. The surviving musical reference was a string quartet written in 1923. "I was imagining a poor woman, tormented and run down, just like the one the Russian writer Tolstoy describes in his *Kreutzer Sonata*," Janácek wrote to Kamila Stosslova. There was more to the story: the composer had fallen in love with her at age 63; she was 25…and they both were married.

The music references certain parts of the Beethoven score, but more importantly the tumult of emotions involved in sexual desire, rage, and the effect of musical ecstasy. "The music is often less melody than a compelling, emotionally charged talking: Janácek's attention to speech patterns is evidence in his music that eloquently speaks. A noteworthy aspect of his style is the tendency for thematic variety by using the same motif at different speeds, in particular accelerating into rapid repetitive patterns, mesmerizing ostinato almost akin to minimalism." (earsense blog)

The first movement opens with a two measure adagio (note the shuddering tremolos) before moving to a con moto presentation of a nervous, agitated, skittering short theme from the cello. This will recur with impunity and

unrelenting strength during the movement. Be prepared also for rapid alternation of tempi as a constant (there are eighteen changes) throughout the 164 bars of the first movement. The effect is powerfully seductive: rapid heart stopping moments of excitement, withdrawal, reflective sections, and the overall prominence of the thematic idea which will not release its power or potency.

In bar two, the viola immediately introduces a theme which will impregnate the entire second movement. Unlike the first movement, however, this theme will undergo temporal and intervallic changes, changes in accompaniment figures, but never loses its general shape. Janácek includes many measures of silence: catching ones breath, so to speak. The danger of the seduction, and its grip, can be felt in the multiple tremolo sul ponticello sections: a shaking or shuddering passage played near the bridge of the instrument, resulting in an eerie sound. Tempo markings of stringendo (moving faster and tightening), energico and appassionato (cognates work here!) create a headlong unstoppable passion. The close features a rough, loud repetition of the theme from violin and cello, leading to a very soft final measure of collapse.

The third movement opens with a four bar canonic conversation between cello and first violin: interrupted by frenzied responses from second violin and viola. This grouping and pattern continues until the frenetic passage is picked by the cello partnering with the second violin.

Nothing is settled or controlled: all is hysterical, running out of bounds.

Janácek's speaking style, i.e. writing with reference to spoken language, can be heard mid-section in repetitive passages of descending octaves in 5/4 meter, later shortened to 4/4 meter. All relaxes out for the glide toward the finish line: only a tiny reference to the former frenzy (measure 101) interrupts the quiet adagio conclusion.

The final movement opens quietly at adagio pace, presenting a mournful tune mainly sung by the first violin. Interruption by fast playing is only momentary before a sorrowful section ensues: no rest: more interruptions lead to emotional frenzy. In the final region of this movement, the first violin emerges from the chaos, sings in vain over the wild accompaniment of the other instruments before the concluding wrenching coda, and total exhaustion at the close.

Composer Josef Suk also played 2nd violin in the Czech Quartet for the premiere of this work on October 17, 1924: he reported that in this quartet "Janácek wished to protest the tyranny of men over women."