

Leos Janacek's String Quartet No. 1, "Kreutzer Sonata"

Written by bluesever

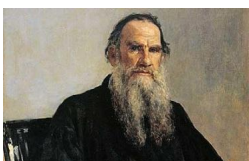
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What links Tolstoy, Beethoven, a virtuoso violinist and a young, married Czech woman? The inspiration for the elderly Janacek's string quartets. Beethoven's heroic sonata for violin and piano, Tolstoy's dark and disturbing novella, and Leos Janacek's intensely descriptive and often frenetic first string quartet are all linked by the same name: the **Kreutzer Sonata**. Rodolphe Kreutzer, a French violin virtuoso who ignored Beethoven's dedication and never performed the original sonata (apparently declaring it unplayable), is known today for a book of useful violin studies, but primarily for these three great works that bear his name, and whose value he could have barely imagined.

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In Tolstoy's 1889 novella, a woman who is trapped in a loveless marriage plays Beethoven's sonata with a dashing violinist, and seems carried away by the music's passion. Her husband, plagued by jealous fantasies, cuts short a business trip and comes home unexpectedly, well after midnight. He finds her together with the violinist in the dining room, fully clothed but involved in an intimate conversation. Convinced she has betrayed him, he kills her in a fit of jealous rage. Since Tolstoy narrates this tale through the husband's obsessive and bitter point of view, we never know for sure what has happened between the unnamed wife and her sonata partner.



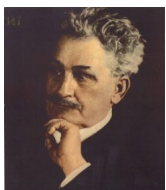
Leo Tolstoy

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Janacek's string quartets were borne from his love for Kamila Stösslova. In 1917, the 63 year old composer fell in love with a 25 year old woman. Though the infatuation was one-sided, and he was well aware of it, she became his inspiring Muse. They lived in different cities and were both married, but carried on written correspondence.



Leos Janacek

"As obsessed as he was with Kamila, Janacek was obsessed with short musical ideas that could convey maximum emotional impact in the fewest possible notes" says commentator Rob Kapilow.



Kamila Stösslova, portrait

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The First String Quartet, composed swiftly in autumn 1923, uses Leo Tolstoy's short story "The Kreutzer Sonata" as its primary source material. *"I was imagining a poor woman, tormented and run down, just like the one the Russian writer Tolstoy describes in his Kreutzer Sonata"*, Janacek confided in one of his letters to Kamila. Janacek was attracted by the novella's dramatic urgency and emotional extremes, and he succeeded in rendering its narrative arc in a compelling series of musical events.



Rodolphe Kreutzer

Leos Janacek's String Quartet No. 1, "Kreutzer Sonata", was written in a very short space of time, between 13 and 28 October 1923, at a time of great creative concentration. The work was revised by the composer in the autograph from 30 October to 7 November 1923.



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Janacek with wife

The work as a whole seems to be constructed by the juxtaposition of melodic and rhythmic fragments. The melancholy first movement, with its opening rising motif, sets the tone of the work. The narrator is recounting to us a tale told to him by a stranger on a train. The second movement scherzo, a rather grim one at that, is again composed of fragments; a polka-like theme, a tremolo passage played *sul ponticello* (at the bridge), and a motif somewhat related to the theme from Beethoven that will be featured in the following movement. The third movement actually quotes the second, slow theme from the first movement of Beethoven's work, first heard in measure 8. Its distortion and obsessive repetition suggest that we are hearing it through the ears of the jealous husband. In the fourth movement, we hear a reprise of the rising motif from the first movement in the low strings, as well as a theme played by the first violin marked *"like in tears"*. In this movement the drama is brought to its terrible end.



Janacek with Kamila Stosslova

Janacek once wrote: *"I maintain that a pure musical note means nothing unless it is pinned down in life, blood and locale; otherwise, it is a worthless toy."* Reading through Janacek's letters, Rob Kapilow says there are hints that the composer was aware of his own fictionalized love affair. Yet the fiction must have been incredibly real, driving him to compose piece after piece. *"Maybe in the areas of inspiration, the distinction between fiction and reality is unimportant,"* Kapilow says.

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"In any case, we should all be as lucky and creative with our fictions as Janacek was with his."



Leos Janacek

The work was premiered by the Bohemian Quartet at a concert in Prague on Oct. 17, 1924. It then received a performance at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Venice in 1925, followed two years later by its U.S. premiere in New York.



The Kreutzer Sonata