

# INTERNATIONAL VIOLA D'AMORE SOCIETY E.V.

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**Remarks to his film project «Janáček-Quartett» at Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) by Pierre-Henri Xuereb**

## **Janáček: Quartet No. 2 with viola d'amore**

Offering to perform a work from the Baroque, Classical or Romantic period in its original version has been a common practice for many years now. To have the privilege of performing a work in its original version eighty years after its creation in an arranged form is rare.

The quartet presented here was rewritten for a number of reasons; firstly because the “Moravian Quartet”, which premiered the piece, wished to perform it not in its original version for two violins, viola d'amore and cello, but in the traditional nomenclature with a viola instead of a viola d'amore. Janáček thus made an arrangement of his own piece, to which additions suggested by the performers (the Moravian Quartet) were made, and the piece was finally published in 1938.

Distinguished musicologists have studied the original version of this masterpiece. An edition that is in preparation by Bärenreiter should make the piece available in its original version with viola d'amore.

In order to perform this work in concert today, I began by questioning the feasibility of the viola d'amore part for a long time, and then – given the evidence of Janáček's real interest in this instrument throughout his life – I went through the process of finding an effective scordatura that would allow the composer's wishes to be fulfilled. The scordatura which I found in a more or less empirical way, but which seemed to me to translate the composer's expectations in the best way, is, starting from the treble: d'' – g' – d' – a flat – d flat – c (which gives an ambitus that goes from the low note of the viola to a treble almost like that of the violin).

Sometimes I think of the famous story of a teacher of string instruments, who deliberately detuned a student's instrument and asked him to play in tune. On a Janáček-type scordatura, one is faced with the same kind of sensation...

With the abovementioned scordatura, the theme of the second movement can be played without string skips, which is obviously better for the continuity of the phrasing. In addition, the tone of the open strings 4 and 5 (A flat, D flat) gives this passage a bewitching character.

Double strings and three tone chords are easier to play than on a viola.

The chord in fourth (perfect and augmented), perfect fifth and minor second very often allows for several possible fingerings for the same note, and therefore several possibilities of sounds, which brings an additional richness of tones and very nuanced possibilities of bisbigliandos, specific to the viola d'amore.

The resonance poles of the entire instrument increase, supported by the tuning of the sympathetic strings which are aligned with the instrument's tuning.

The melodies of the third movement and at the very end of the quartet are a continuation of the 'baroque' use of the viola d'amore, mainly on the two high-pitched strings, using the high positions willingly; the whole sounding more easily than on a viola.

The scordatura and viola d'amore have always gone hand in hand (Biber, Vivaldi, Klaus Huber, Giuliano D'Angiolini...). Moreover, it is the works conceived with a specific tuning by the composer that have had the greatest impact on the instrument's repertoire.

The mechanics and the development of listening skills are constantly called upon due to the use by composers (and therefore by the performer!) of a six- or seven-string instrument played with different scordaturas. As the work of finding the best fingerings for a passage progresses, a sort of "mini-mechanism" is set in motion in parallel with the work of the inner ear, seeking (in an increasingly refined manner) to obtain the "right" sequences of sounds linked to the best possible fingerings.

The multiplicity of strings allowing for several possible fingerings leads to a (very productive) study of each small section that the performer must make in order to "master" the score. I could compare this work to that of using vibrato, which is unfortunately still too often perceived as a tap that can be turned on or off, whereas each note, in each score, should have its own vibrato dosage (from the most discreet possible to the most generous).

"Deciphering" on an instrument tuned in a particular way for a particular work is extremely difficult, if not impossible. It is interesting to observe the exponential speed with which these tuning mechanisms settle in the body and the brain.

Just as the beginner, however gifted he might be, needs a learning period, which can be long at times, the interpreter here is also learning, but at an accelerated pace. Playing in scordatura undoubtedly teaches one to get to know oneself better through the progress made and the speed with which this progress is achieved, with inevitable stages and questions that one is absolutely obliged to ask oneself.

The marvellous instrument that is the viola d'amore therefore only allows us to work with mini mechanisms, each chord obliging us to develop the one that its own logic induces. Playing scales from the bottom to the top of the neck is of no interest on the viola d'amore, since such work would be supposed to allow us to develop a certain knowledge of the neck with a certain tuning of the instrument. A knowledge that we will have to put on the back burner anyway for a different tuning desired by another composer.

With each new scordatura, certain seemingly difficult double strings or note sequences become simple and other seemingly simple ones become difficult. This apparent complexity/simplicity constitutes a richness that was virtually unexplored – at least at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One can imagine Janáček's disappointment when he received the scores of Massenet's opera solos for viola d'amore (I am thinking of the *Jongleur de Notre-Dame*, which uses slow, fast or harmonic D major arpeggios, but without much instrumental inventiveness). When one thinks of the subtlety of Biber's *Partita* a few hundred years earlier (tuned in c minor with six strings), it is understandable that Janáček sought to exploit all sorts of technical possibilities specific to the viola d'amore: use of the treble, rapid bariolages, triads, and a play on polytonalities easily derived from the scordatura.

What Janáček has expressed in such a quartet can be placed, in terms of the interaction of the timbres involved, in line with Bach's sixth *Brandenburg Concerto*, with violas da gamba, violas and cellos. The rich timbre of a viola d'amore, though at times fragile in the midst of modern violins and cello, is all the more unique when mixed with another family of instruments. It is undoubtedly this mixture of timbres that should interest Janáček and that gives this *Quartet* its particular charm.

Pierre-Henri Xuereb

Translation: Manon Wilhelm

## Alain Poirier, Directeur du Conservatoire de Paris (2000-2009) said on the same project

*"I focus on the word 'expressionism' [...]. Although he never referred to it himself, Janáček is in fact the only great composer to whom this term could apply entirely and in its literal sense: for him everything is expression, and no note has the right to exist if it is not expression. Hence the total absence of anything merely 'technical': transitions, developments, the mechanics of contrapuntal filler, orchestration routines (on the other hand, an attraction to novel ensembles consisting of a few solo instruments), etc. The result for the performer is that, since each note is expression, each note (not only a motive, but each note of a motive) must have maximum expressive clarity. Again, to clarify: German expressionism is characterised by a predilection for excessive moods, delirium, madness. What I call expressionism in regards to Janáček has nothing to do with this one-sidedness: it is a rich emotional spectrum, a dizzyingly tight confrontation without transitions of tenderness and brutality, fury and peace."*

There are only few commentators who, like Kundera in *Testaments Betrayed*, have been able to synthesise Janáček's art with such relevance: The composer's personal expressionism, as defined by the writer, finds its application in the scenic works, and especially in the last pieces of work *The Makropulos Affair* or *From the House of the Dead*, in which the mastery of musical drama is carried by music based on breaks, unexpected repetitions and those moments of sudden emotion when the music multiplies the text, however strong it may be in itself. What is remarkable is that this particular attention, which is perfectly in context in the operas, is less a dramatic intention dictated by the musical setting of a theatrical argument, but rather a genuine way of expressing oneself, whatever the genre, right up to this final *Second Quartet*. Although the string quartet genre embodied the other side of musical production from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century – that of so-called "pure" or "absolute" music – Janáček's writing retains this same quality of the unpredictability of the rhetoric, always based on surprise and constant renewal, in the name, as Kundera puts it, of "maximum expressive clarity".

The opportunity to perform the *Second Quartet* in this original version - to some extent a re-creation of one of the composer's essential works – is an exceptional event and a unique opportunity to rediscover Janáček's rich music, which would not have been possible without the musicological assistance of Lenka Stranska and the editorial assistance of Miroslav Srnka of Bärenreiter, who have made it possible to present this premiere at the Conservatoire de Paris. The idea to confide this performance to a quartet made up of professionals – Sylvie Gazeau, Sébastien Richaud, Jérôme Pernoo – brought together by the care and enthusiasm of Pierre-Henri Xuereb, a great advocate of the viola d'amore and the artistic director of this concert, could not have come into being without their investment and their common concern to serve this ever more fascinating music. Combining this presentation of the sources and the edition with an analytical reading by Jean-François Boukobza, another great connoisseur of Janáček's work, quickly imposed itself to provide better support for this performance and thus give this event a very particular value and meaning. Finally, Anne Bongrain, director of the Conservatory's Research and Publishing Centre, Cécile Grand, head of the Musicology and Analysis Department, and Catherine de Boishéraud, head of the Audiovisual Department, provided invaluable assistance in the execution of this evening.

May everyone be warmly thanked for their involvement in the service of one of the great chamber music scores of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Alain Poirier Directeur du Conservatoire

Translation: Manon Wilhelm