

Pavel Haas (1899-1944) String Quartet No 1 in C sharp minor, Opus 3 (1920)

Pavel Haas was born in Brno in 1899 into a Jewish family. He studied composition at the Brno Conservatory from 1919 to 1921 under Jan Kunc and Vilém Petrželka, themselves pupils of Leoš Janáček, during which time he wrote this the first of three string quartets. He subsequently studied for two years in the master class of Janáček himself. While Haas worked in his father's shoemaking business he wrote more than 50 works, including symphonic and choral works, lieder, chamber music, scores for cinema and theatre and the opera *Šarlatán* (The Charlatan).

In 1941, Haas was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Prior to his arrest, he had officially divorced his wife Soňa (the former wife of Russian linguist Roman Jakobson) in order that she and their young daughter would not suffer a similar fate. Haas composed several works while in the camp including his best-known piece the *Study for String Orchestra*. In 1944 the Nazis remodeled Theresienstadt just before a visit from the Red Cross and a propaganda film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (The Führer Gives the Jews a City) was made. In the film Theresienstadt, children are seen singing the opera *Brundibar* by Hans Krása (another inmate) and Haas can be seen taking a bow after the performance, conducted by Karel Ančerl, of his *Study for String Orchestra*. When the propaganda project was over, the Nazis transferred 18,000 prisoners, including Haas and the children who had sung in *Brundibar*, to Auschwitz-Birkenau where he and many others died.

Grove's Music OnLine describes Haas' style:

"Janáček apart, Haas's melodic style owed much to Moravian folksong, Jewish chant and medieval chorale, while his rhythmic and harmonic thinking was influenced by contemporary Western European music and jazz. Although Haas and Janáček share a liking for concise motifs, Haas's are quite different in character from Janáček's. This difference is most apparent in the opera *The Charlatan*, its topic far removed from the world of Janáček while at the same time demonstrating remarkable dramatic talent. In Czech music, Haas represents a trend connecting the Czech national tradition with pioneering acts of international music."

The first quartet is a single movement sonata-form fantasia that lasts just under 15 minutes. The sombre fugal introduction is reminiscent of the opening of that most famous of quartets in C# minor, Beethoven's Op 131, a daunting model for a 20-year old student. The introduction gives way to an angular and increasingly muscular theme (*appassionato et risoluto*) that is gradually unveiled by the viola and cello over a Janáček-like repeated accompaniment. This theme in turn gives way to a gentler, more reflective theme on the violin, encouraged by the viola and cello. The two themes are ingeniously developed, and after a substantial climax the music ebbs away to a pianissimo reminder of the introduction.