

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my Life' (1876)

Allegro vivo appassionato

Allegro moderato à la Polka

Largo sostenuto

Vivace

Smetana, the son of an affluent brewer, heard string quartets played at home, and learned the violin from an early age. As a piano and composition student in Prague he also played in a string quartet for which he wrote arrangements of pieces he had heard played by military bands at promenade concerts. Although he wrote both a string quartet (now lost) at the age of 15, and a passionate piano trio in his early 30s after the death of his favourite daughter, it was not until his last decade that he returned to quartet writing.

In 1874, after conducting Prague's National Provisional Theatre's orchestra for 8 years, Smetana was forced to resign his post because of increasingly troublesome tinnitus. Despite rest and quiet, the noises in his ears became worse and soon he lost all hearing in both ears. In 1876, he moved from Prague to Jabkenice to live with his eldest daughter. His continuing profound deafness did not impair his ability to compose, and soon after arriving in Jabkenice he wrote his first string quartet – what he described as an intimate confession depicting the course of his life "... using four instruments speaking among themselves in something like a friendly circle".

The work opens with a long declamatory solo by the viola. At the first private performance of the work, the viola was played by Dvorák, who had been a violist in Smetana's Prague orchestra. In a letter to a friend Smetana described the autobiographical nature of the work as follows:



"My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune . . . The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me. The second movement, a quasi- polka, brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement . . . reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret."