

Smetana's Life – A String Quartet

Sue Macfarlane and her friends recently attended a music course in the Czech Republic. They chose to study Smetana's string quartet "From my Life" because a) they were going to Czechia and b) were going to be coached by a top Czech professional string quartet.

John Macfarlane, himself a musician, introduced the music and brought it to life with some of the anecdotes told to the players during their study week.

Smetana's music was ahead of his time – his contemporaries were Glinka, Schumann, Wagner, Mendelssohn – and much of it has a very modern ring. Though in poverty and pain towards the end of his life, Smetana continued to compose, turning often to chamber music for intensely personal reflection. He wrote this pioneering programmatic string quartet, "From my Life" in 1876. Smetana lived in Victorian times when childhood mortality was about 50%, and his family was no exception. He was very upset by the death of his musically gifted eldest daughter and wrote a dramatic piano trio; in it is the first appearance of what has come to be regarded as a "fate" motif in his music. This fate motif is played repeatedly in the first movement. Smetana wrote of the ardent, lyrical 3rd movement: it *"brings to mind the bliss of my first love for the girl who later became my faithful wife."* The movement opens with a cello recitative which represents a visit to his wife's grave; the whole movement should be regarded as a paean to love and is full of memories.

Like his near-contemporary Glinka, Smetana was enthusiastic about national folk music - later enthusiasts included Bartok and Kodaly in Hungary and Ralph Vaughan Williams in Britain. The Finale of the quartet dashes off with a rollicking folk-like tune, but instead of the expected joyous ending, however, the high spirits dissolve into shuddering tremolos, and the first violin emits an eerie high E denoting the ringing in his ears (tinnitus), which heralded his deafness. After this, themes from the first movement return in fragmentary form and silence engulfs us.

