

When theatre and music collide

Laura Barnett

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Brian Friel's latest play features a string quartet playing on stage. The director tells Laura Barnett why



In a salon in Brno in the Czech Republic, in 1928, a 74-year-old man is falling in love with a woman 40 years his junior. He is the composer Leos Janáček, she Kamila Stösslová, the wife of an antiques dealer, Janáček's good friend. Their passion will inspire more than 700 love letters and a string quartet that will continue to move listeners almost a century later.

So tradition would have it. But *Performances*, a recent work by the Irish playwright Brian Friel, about to receive its UK première at Wilton's Music Hall in east London, casts doubt on this well-worn tale of a musical genius inspired in his twilight years by a young muse.

The place is the same Brno salon, but the time is 2006. In a magical, time-slipping encounter, PhD student Anzeka Ungrova (played by Rosamund Pike) comes to interview Janáček (Henry Goodman) about his obsession with Kamila. Ungrova is convinced that Kamila had a great influence on his second string quartet, dubbed *Intimate Letters* after his frantically romantic missives. Janáček's response is unexpected: he denies any connection between the woman and his work.

"This play calls into question the nature of the love between Janáček and Kamila," says director Lou Stein. "There's no real evidence that Kamila returned his expressions of love. Brian Friel asks whether Janáček created in her a woman that didn't really exist. Maybe he needed to create that in order to write the music."

The writing of *Intimate Letters* is central to *Performances*, which places a professional string quartet - here the Brodsky Quartet, one of Britain's foremost classical ensembles - on stage as named characters rehearsing the work as the action unfolds. For Janáček purists, it could be a double blow - undermining the comfortable myth of Kamila as muse, and making the music an adjunct to a piece of modern, conceptual theatre.

"The play is certainly challenging traditional notions," says Stein. "There are going to be a lot of Janáček specialists who will say, 'No, that's wrong.' But there will also be people who don't know anything about Janáček and discover him and his music through the play."

Stein is no stranger to breaking with tradition. The former artistic director of the ground-breaking Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, west London, he has recently turned his attention to eroding the barriers between theatre and classical music - inspired in no small part, he admits, by his wife, the contemporary composer Deirdre Gribbin.

She partnered him in his last major project, *Venus Blazing*, which took classical music, drama and rock-influenced lighting on tour last year to venues such as Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall and the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London.

But it was three years ago, while having a few drinks with some classical musicians in the considerably less grand setting of a pool hall in Cork, Ireland, that Stein first heard about Friel's new play.

"They had just seen *Performances* at the Dublin Festival [its only previous staging], and they said it was perfect for me because of the interplay between music and drama," says Stein. "I was intrigued - I've always been a great admirer of Brian Friel. I consider him a legendary living playwright."

Stein got hold of the script, was excited by what he read, and arranged meetings with Friel. Stein believes Friel's

obvious passion for music - and the fact that he has written the quartet into the script - makes Performances unlike any other piece of musical theatre.

"I'm hard-pressed to think of any play which integrates music and drama in such a way," he says. "It's a great challenge, having musicians alongside professional actors like this, but the wonderful thing about Brian's writing is that he has integrated the music in a playwright's way. The quartet is not underscoring the action - they're part of it."

The Brodskys decided to take part after an intense three-hour meeting with Stein. He wanted them for their superb musical knowledge of Intimate Letters; they found that the play fitted with their wider plans to unite classical music and theatre.

"The opportunity came at the right time - we had already been looking at performing theatrical versions of classical pieces," says cellist Jacqueline Thomas. "We were very excited; we love Friel's work, and we've been playing Intimate Letters since we were kids."

Stein also hopes that the two notoriously insular worlds of classical music and theatre will collide successfully in his production - and that the doubts Performances raises over the role of Janáček's muse will be seen as playful, rather than iconoclastic.

"I know I've got a wonderful play," says Stein. "I think fans of Janáček's music will love it because it asks questions about Janáček in an intriguing and provocative way. It's exciting to take these opposites and bring them together. If I've turned a trick, and integrated the drama and the music, then it will be a truly extraordinary experience."

- 'Performances' opens at Wilton's Music Hall (020 7702 2789) on July 3 and runs until July 15.

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