

LÉNER QUARTET *plays Debussy, Ravel & Franck*

The Léner Quartet were among several groups to arise from the Budapest Opera Orchestra after the Great War. All born in 1894-95, the players had a particularly uniform style: three were pupils of Jenő Hubay and the cellist was a Carl Popper disciple. Jenő Léner, the prodigy of Hubay's class, had played in the first violins of the Budapest Philharmonic at 11; József Smilovits had won the Reményi Prize; Sándor Róth had appeared as a soloist and was already teaching at the Academy; and Imre Hartman, who had won the Popper Prize, anchored the group with firm rhythm and a tone of depth and penetration. Their ensemble was Leó Weiner's first success as a chamber music coach.

The 1918 revolution was their cue to leave the orchestra and retire to the country with a trunkful of scores, to work on repertoire. In 1919 they made their Budapest début and in 1920 gave a Vienna recital attended by prominent musicians including Ravel. He coached them and urged them to play in Paris, which they did the next autumn, causing a sensation. In 1922 they toured Italy and played six times at Wigmore Hall, London. Their pianist was Florence-based Olga Loeser-Lebert, pupil of Max Pauer, grand-daughter of composer and teacher Sigmund Lebert and widow of art critic Charles Loeser. She hosted their rehearsal stints at her lavish villa.

London became a home from home for the Léners: they were quickly snapped up by the Columbia Graphophone Company Limited, who had developed a new shellac compound, marketing their products as 'Columbia New Process Records - the ONLY Records without Scratch'. From 13 November 1922 the Léners were fixtures in the Columbia studios, although some early electrics were made at Wigmore Hall. The group's records did so well that in 1935 they were presented with a Gold Disc.

Forays to North America in 1929-31 were successful artistically but not financially, so the Léners consolidated their European career. They especially liked to present series of recitals illustrating the development of the string quartet. The outbreak of war in 1939 found them touring South America and in 1941 three of them decided to settle in Mexico City. Jenő Léner, however, was set on continuing and, to the others' dismay, abandoned them. By 1942 he was in New York with new colleagues, but this ensemble was plagued by personnel changes. After the war he returned to Europe, insisting on hiring Weiner pupils to keep the style consistent. In 1948 the group visited South America for three months, giving Beethoven cycles in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. However, Léner's death from cancer in New York on 4 November brought an end to an illustrious ensemble.

In their heyday the Léners' wide vibrato and lavish portamenti did not raise eyebrows, even in Franco-Belgian music. The acoustic Franck *Lento*, perhaps their least-known disc, allows us to hear them with Loeser-Lebert. Debussy never met them but he would surely have appreciated how they keep his faster movements up to tempo; and we know that Ravel coached them assiduously in his Quartet.

TULLY POTTER



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FRANK Piano Quintet in F minor (1879)

1. 2nd Mvt. - Lento con molto sentimento (8:33)

Olga Loeser-Lebert (piano)

Recorded 8 November 1923 in the Clerkenwell Road Studios, London

Matrix nos.: AX 219-1 & 220-4

First issued as Columbia L 1620

Producer and Audio
Restoration Engineer:
Mark Obert-Thorn

Special thanks to Nathan
Brown, David Schmutz and
Charles Niss for providing
source material

Total duration: 63:35

DEBUSSY String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 (1893)

2. 1st Mvt. - Animé et très décidé (7:03)

3. 2nd Mvt. - Assez vif bien rythmé (3:58)

4. 3rd Mvt. - Andantino, doucement expressif (7:31)

5. 4th Mvt. - Très modéré (7:51)

Recorded 15 March 1928 in London

Matrix nos.: WAX 3378-2, 3379-1, 3380-1, 3381-2, 3382-1, 3383-1 & 3384-1

First issued as Columbia L 2141/4

RAVEL String Quartet in F major (1903)

6. 1st Mvt. - Allegro moderato - très doux (8:12)

7. 2nd Mvt. - Assez vif - très doux (6:17)

8. 3rd Mvt. - Très lent (8:47)

9. 4th Mvt. - Vif et agité (5:23)

Recorded 27 February and 2 March 1933 in Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London

Matrix nos.: CAX 6721-1, 6722-2, 6723-2, 6724-2, 6725-2, 6726-2, 6727-1 & 6728-2

First issued as Columbia LX 270/3

Léner String Quartet

Jenő Léner (violin I)

Josef Smilovits (violin II)

Sándor Róth (viola)

Imre Hartman (cello)

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