

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, on almost every occasion in their career, was Florence-based Olga Loeser-Lebert (1887–1942, née Lebert Kaufmann), pupil of Max Pauer, grand-daughter of the composer and teacher Sigmund Lebert and wife since 1914 of the American art critic and collector Charles A. Loeser. The Léners were regularly able to stay and rehearse at the Loesers' home, the Villa Torri Gattaia, and the couple's friends were often invited to hear them play. 'Carlo' Loeser bought a Stradivari violin for Jenő Lener and subsidised the quartet in other ways. Even after his death in 1928, Olga Loeser-Lebert kept up her close friendship and working relationship with the quartet.

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 electric recordings 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.

Tully Potter

Olga Loeser-Lebert made only four commercial recordings, all with the Léner Quartet. This release brings together two of them. (The others were the Lento from the Franck Quintet, on Pristine PACM 116, and the Schumann Quintet, to be released in an upcoming volume.) The Smetana movement and (oddly) the Dvořák "American" Quartet were never released in the USA. The Smetana only stayed in the catalog until 1930, and was so little known that it was not even mentioned in WERM.

Mark Obert-Thorn



léner quartet

plays dvořák, smetana & brahms

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACM 122

disc one (63:38)

DVOŘÁK String Quartet No. 10 in E flat major, Op. 51

1. 1st mvt. - Allegro ma non troppo (8:13)
2. 2nd mvt. - Dumka: Andante con moto - Vivace (9:08)
3. 3rd mvt. - Romanza: Andante con moto (6:41)
4. 4th mvt. - Finale: Allegro assai (7:01)

Recorded 20 September and 28 November 1938 in Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrix nos.: CAX 8297-2, 8298-1, 8299-1, 8300-2, 8301-3, 8302-3, 8303-1 & 8304-1
First issued as Columbia LX 793/6

SMETANA String Quartet No. 1 in E minor

"From My Life"

5. 3rd mvt. - Largo sostenuto (7:49)

Recorded 15 March 1926 in London
Matrix nos.: WAX 1283-3 & 1284-4
First issued as Columbia L 1767

DVOŘÁK String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96

"American"

6. 1st mvt. - Allegro ma non troppo (7:33)
7. 2nd mvt. - Lento (7:50)
8. 3rd mvt. - Molto vivace (4:06)
9. 4th mvt. - Finale: Vivace ma non troppo (5:17)

Recorded 24 May 1932 in Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrix nos.: CAX 6309-4, 6310-4, 6311-3, 6312-4, 6315-4 & 6316-4
First issued as Columbia LX 183/5

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Special thanks to Nathan Brown, Richard Kaplan and Charles Niss for providing source material

Total duration: 2hr 12:47

disc two (69:09)

DVOŘÁK Piano Quintet No. 2 in A major, Op. 81

1. 1st mvt. - Allegro, ma non tanto (9:35)
2. 2nd mvt. - Dumka: Andante con moto (11:59)
3. 3rd mvt. - Scherzo (Furiant): Molto vivace (4:21)
4. 4th mvt. - Finale: Allegro (7:58)

Olga Loeser-Lebert (piano)

Recorded 1-2 October 1930 in the Columbia Petty France Studio, London
Matrix nos.: WAX 5765-1, 5766-2, 5771-2, 5772-2, 5773-2, 5774-1, 5775-2 & 5776-2
First issued as Columbia LX 150/3

BRAHMS Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34

5. 1st mvt. - Allegro non troppo (10:26)
6. 2nd mvt. - Andante, un poco adagio (7:49)
7. 3rd mvt. - Scherzo: Allegro (7:12)
8. 4th mvt. - Finale: Poco sostenuto - Allegro non troppo - Presto, non troppo (9:49)

Olga Loeser-Lebert (piano)

Recorded 4 March 1927 in Wigmore Hall, London
Matrix nos.: WRAX 2473-2, 2474-2, 2475-2, 2476-2, 2477-1, 2478-2, 2479-3, 2480-2, 2481-2 & 2482-2
First issued as Columbia L 2040/4

Léner String Quartet

Jenő Léner (violin I)

Josef Smilovits (violin II)

Sándor Róth (viola)

Imre Hartman (cello)

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