



## Winter Warmer II: Intimate Voices

### **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957): String Quartet in D Minor, Op. 56, "Intimate Voices" (1909)**

Jean Sibelius is a cultural icon in Finland. Widely regarded as that country's greatest composer, his music is often credited with having helped Finland develop a stronger national identity when his country was resisting attempts of Russification in the late 19th century. As a schoolboy, Sibelius would often roam through the forest with his violin. His music is often described as a Romantic representation of the Finnish landscape, with a unique voice inspired by Finnish folk music and mythology.

This five-movement work begins with an enchanting dialogue that establishes its introspective tone, and then spins into a murmurous conversation punctuated by assertive cadences.

The second movement is a swift and bright scherzo, fleetly ricocheting between raucous and ravishing.

The deep center of the work is the central slow movement where, over three distinctive muted chords, Sibelius wrote the phrase "voces intimae" in the manuscript. Tender, heartfelt lines unfold lyrically, tinged by a silvery Nordic coolness. Harmonic resolution is postponed until the very end, one of the few moments of true repose in the entire quartet.

Like the first scherzo, the fourth "scherzando" movement picks up melodic material from the beginning of the quartet, as well as some of its murmuring figures. The tonality here is dark and nuanced, infused with a nervous energy.

The fiery finale has a fierce driving perpetual motion with more than a hint of folk fiddling. Initially marking the movement Allegro, Sibelius adds *più allegro* (more lively), then *poco a poco più allegro ed energico* (little by little more lively and energetic), and then *sempre più energico* (always more energetic), as the music rushes onward in a swirling, dizzying dance until it reaches its final, definitive cadence.

### **Anton Bruckner (1824-1896): String Quintet in F Major (1878-1879)**

Anton Bruckner is best known for his monumental symphonic works, among the most ambitious of the 19th century. Born in a small Austrian village, he spent his youth in borderline obsessive study of

musical arcana and aspirations to become a great organist (which he achieved). Largely self-taught as a composer, Bruckner only started writing seriously at age 37 in 1861. His compositions helped to define contemporary musical radicalism, owing to their dissonances, abrupt modulations, and roving harmonies, teetering on the brink of atonality.

The string quintet is his only large chamber work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has quite a bit in common with Bruckner's symphonic oeuvre: vigorous counterpoint; rich, chromatic harmonies; a Wagnerian approach to motivic materials; references to Austrian folk music (particularly the rustic *ländler*, a dance also much-loved by Mahler); and a treatment of the five instruments (a pair each of violins and violas, plus cello) as a scaled-down version of a full orchestra.

The first movement is exquisitely constructed, full of yearning, lyrical themes that are drawn out and developed at great Brucknerian length. Quirky and highly syncopated, the Scherzo has a contemplative mood to it, buoyant and warm. Its trio section has a folksy Viennese lilt, with off-kilter moments. The famously gorgeous Adagio opens with a hymnlike violin melody that unfolds over a series of gently melancholic chord progressions, and takes listeners directly to heaven. In the finale movement, lilting motifs hover over an organ-like underpinning, with elements of Austrian folk music that meander into spacious, lengthy fantasias before coming to a lively finish.