PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

**Leos Janácek**
Born July 3, 1854, Hukvaldy, Moravia.
Died August 12, 1928, Moravská Ostrava, Czechoslovakia.

**Sinfonietta**

For every composer like Mendelssohn or Mozart, who begins to write significant and lasting works as a child, there are figures such as Bruckner or Janácek, who don't hit their stride until late in life. Janácek certainly would not be known to us today had he, like Mozart, died at the age of thirty-five. But, in his sixties, he was unexpectedly inspired, and, after the success of his opera *Jenufa* in 1916, he was instantly famous. For the next twelve years he wrote regularly, turning out one masterwork after another.

During the final decade of his life, Kamila Stösslová, thirty-eight years younger than the composer and already married, contributed greatly to this creative flurry as his reluctant muse. From the time they met in the summer of 1917, Janácek, despite his own marriage of some thirty-five years, wrote her a letter almost daily, declaring his passion and telling her about the music that now suddenly flowed from his pen. Kamila was polite but indifferent, but that hardly seems to have mattered to Janácek. (And it apparently didn't trouble his wife Zdenka at all, once she realized her husband loved a woman who would not return his affection.) Over the next eleven years, he wrote literally thousands of letters, and occasionally Kamila responded. At her insistence, he burned her replies, but he would usually wait until he received a new letter before destroying the previous one. In the last year of his life, Janácek kept a separate diary about Kamila. That same year, he considered leaving his wife, as described in the *Diary of One Who Disappeared*, the song cycle he began the year he had met Kamila.

Kamila was the inspiration for most of Janácek's operatic heroines as well as his second string quartet, subtitled *Intimate Letters* (originally *Love Letters*), which tells their story in the passionate but ambiguous language of music. Kamila was with Janácek the day he got the idea for the Sinfonietta in 1926. They were sitting together in the park in the town of Pisek (where she lived with her husband, an antiquities dealer), listening to a band concert. Janácek had recently received a commission to write a fanfare for a national festival of gymnastics in Prague, and, with the first sounds of this festive outdoor music that afternoon, he knew at once how to proceed. The idea of a brief fanfare quickly grew into the five-movement Sinfonietta, his largest purely orchestral work. Each movement is scored for a different—and unconventional—group of instruments; the sound of Janácek's music is so idiosyncratic that for years unsympathetic listeners thought it was simply poorly orchestrated. But the raw, powerful, and often electrifying timbre is part of Janácek's confident, utterly individual voice—matched by his unexpected choices of harmonies and the daring cut of his melodies.

The Sinfonietta opens with echoes of the gymnastics music: brilliant, athletic fanfares for trumpets, tubas, and timpani. These two minutes of music—repetitive and wildly dramatic, marked by brittle sonorities, short phrases, tough harmonies, and a stubborn but relentless move to the climax—are unique in the orchestral literature.

The second movement, scored for winds, four trombones, and strings, is characterized by Janácek's unusual combinations of instruments—high-flying melodies often soar over deep accompaniment figures, with nothing in between—and the unpredictable shift from one idea to another. Janácek's music has its own logic; if this movement were cut into pieces, we would struggle a long time to put the fragments back in a proper, satisfying sequence.

The atmospheric and richly detailed third movement covers a great variety of moods, from the solemn opening to ferocious brass outbursts. In rehearsals for the premiere, the principal flutist complained that
the thirty-second note runs just before the end were unplayable. “Play what you like,” Janácek replied, “but it must sound like the wind.”

The following movement is a set of variations on an insistent, unassuming theme that becomes increasingly fascinating in Janácek’s hands. There are a number of splendid effects—the sudden ringing of a bell, for example, or the slow, benediction-like music that halts the flow near the end.

The finale begins simply enough, but through the ever-fresh changes of instrumentation, Janácek creates a tension that is relieved only by the reappearance of the Sinfonietta’s opening fanfares, encircled now by eerie trills and climaxing in great, shimmering waves of sound.

Janácek died two years after completing the Sinfonietta. He had gone to his cottage in the woods, where he was joined for the first time by Kamila and her eleven-year-old son. One day the boy disappeared, and, while searching the woods, Janácek caught a chill. The boy was found, but Janácek came down with pneumonia and died within days. Seven years later Kamila died. Janácek’s widow Zdenka outlived them both.