

## JEAN CARTAN

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Jean Cartan died young of tuberculosis. He was, without doubt, a very fine French composer.

He was born in Nancy on 1 December 1906 to the famous mathematician Elie Cartan (1869-1951) who married Marie Louise Bianconi in 1903. Jean had a brother, Henri, who lived to be 84, dying in 2008. Henri was also to become a mathematician

As a boy, Jean showed no real interest in music. At the age of 14, something stirred within him to set his sights on music but without any direction as yet. By 1921, he was studying at the Lycee at Versailles and also began studies at the Paris Conservatoire with Widor (1844-1937) and Dukas (1865-1935).

Jean Cartan's String Quartet no 1 is a masterpiece and is dedicated to his mentor, the great French composer Albert Roussel.

Rob Barnett states that this quartet is a conflict between succulent melody and tense dissonance and that Ravel emerges from the thickets of dissonance which embraces Schoenbergian complexity and Cartan's work suggests Howells and Zemlinsky.

All of this is completely untrue and senseless as is his custom. What he writes is contrary to fact and is irrational and meaningless born of his obvious lack of knowledge and learning. Barnett has a bee in his bonnet about dissonance which he clearly does not understand. Cartan's music is nothing like Schoenberg. The quartet is not complex and totally unlike Ravel. How Herbert Howells and Zemlinsky can be comparisons is utterly inane and, therefore, irrelevant.

Another reviewer likens the quartet to those of Janacek who, it is asserted, clearly influenced the Cartan String Quartet no 1. This is highly unlikely. Janacek's quartets were written in 1923 and 1928 respectively and, by 1921, Cartan was very ill with pleurisy and his health was never the same again although he did continue to compose. Tuberculosis set in and he spent much time in hospitals and sanatoriums. He died in a sanatorium in Bligny on 26 March 1932.

Cartan's String Quartet no 1 was completed in 1928 the year the first quartet of Janacek was published in Prague.

The first movement of the Cartan is marked *Animé et énergique* and is D minor. It has a memorable theme with welcome reappearances and it is infectious. It bounces along and is so attractive that you wonder why it is not well-known for, indeed, it should be. It is not nebulous like the Debussy quartet since it is a far greater work.

The second movement is also engaging. It is marked *Vif et nerveux* and that it is. Like the first movement, it has a rhythmic vitality and this movement is also clever in that it does not reveal whether it is in the major or minor. The third movement is marked *très lent* but it is not. It has the character of a fugato with all but the cello playing the theme but providing an ostinato figure. Although in two flats, it ends with a chord of D minor. Despite being marked very slow it is not, but moves along without any risk of tedium. The finale is marked *Très animé* and, again, has a memorable theme. It moves along with unhindered rhythmic power and, again, it ends on a universal D so that major or minor is not determined.

It has all the requirements of a fine string quartet and is a terrific piece of music. The music is coherent and beautifully seamless. It flows mercurially. It is not episodic or 'stop and start' music.

Illness hindered the composing of his Introduction and Allegro for wind and piano which occupied him between 1926 and 1930. There is a choice Sonatina for flute and piano of 1930.

The Quartet no 2 in A was written between 1930 and 1931 and is in three movements. It is also a fine piece although I do not know it as well as the first quartet which is a work of the highest quality which does not cease to affect me with great wonder.

I regret I do not know his songs including the Three Summer Songs for voice and piano and the Five Poems of Tristan Klinsgor for high voice and piano.

What is clear is that Cartan was a talented composer with his own incomparable voice.

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