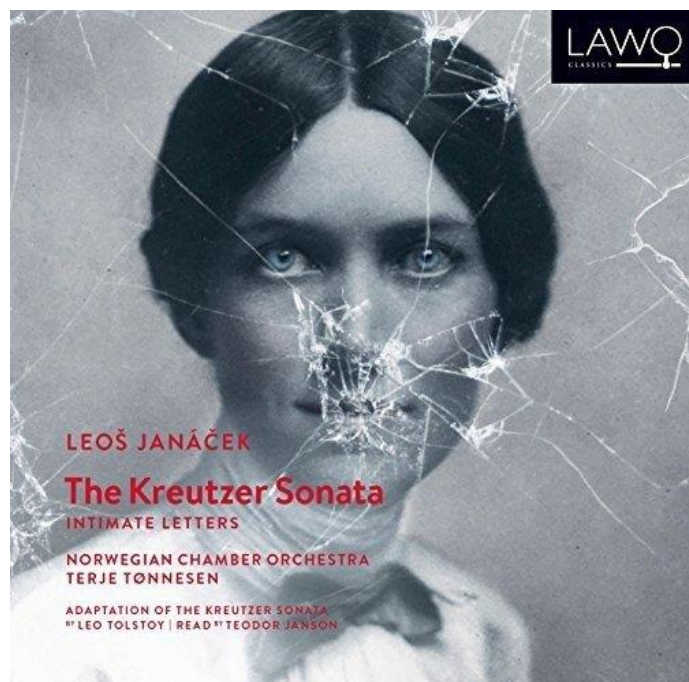


Classical CDs Weekly: Janáček

Unmissable string quartets

by [Graham Rickson](#) Saturday, 13 May 2017



Janáček: String Quartets 1 & 2 (arranged by Terje Tønnesen for string orchestra) Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, Terje Tønnesen (Lawo)

Rudolph Barshai's skilful transcriptions of Shostakovich string quartets have a firm toehold in the string orchestra repertoire, so it's surprising that it's taken this long for someone to apply the same treatment to [Janáček](#)'s two quartets. Terje Tønnesen's new arrangements, made for his superbly responsive [Norwegian Chamber Orchestra](#), are quite brilliant. Largely because of Tønnesen's neat switching between tutti and solo strings, meaning that the really introspective moments lose nothing. And the busier passages gain so much in terms of intensity and weight: the opening of the Second Quartet's finale is unbelievably exciting, as are the *Psycho*-like ponticelli shrieks in the No 1's third movement. What an extraordinary moment this is, the tender viola and cello duet interrupted by fortissimo screeching. The recurring first movement theme sounds more soulful on tutti strings, and the soft music heard just after its reprise in the finale is sublime. The quartet's hushed close is a thing to savour.

I'd happily pay full whack just for those four short movements, but Tønnesen repeats the trick with Quartet No 2, even though the "intimate letters" aren't quite as intimate as we're used to. Much sounds freshly minted: the contrast between the tutti strings' fanfare-like trills at the outset and the soloist's parched, metallic response. The faster sections gain in excitement, and the fruitier climaxes are overwhelming. Like the fast-moving dance passage at the heart of the

third movement, an ecstatic blend of passion and pain. And those final seconds. Stunning. As if that's not enough, there's a pair of bonus discs featuring English and Norwegian versions of Tønnesen's superb adaptation of Tolstoy's short story *The Kreutzer Sonata*, making skilled use of the original Beethoven and Janáček's four quartet movements, wonderfully performed by actor Teodor Janson. It's gripping. All handsomely produced, with detailed notes and the text of Tolstoy's story. Unmissable.

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