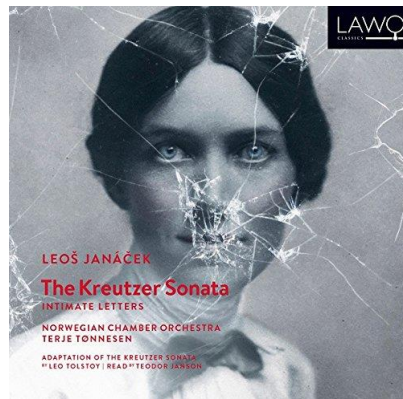


a JANÁČEK String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2 • Terje Tønnesen, cond; Teodor Janson (spkr); Norwegian CO • LAWO 1124 (3 CDs: 106:12)
& Tolstoy *The Kreutzer Sonata* – dramatization in Norwegian and English



Janacek: Kreutzer Sonata

Discounting individual movements such as Barber's *Adagio*, Tchaikovsky's *Andante Cantabile*, and George Walker's molten *Lyric for Strings*, and apart from a few of the Beethovens, the Walton, and—in George Szell's jaw-dropping realization—the Smetana, string quartets don't usually translate all that well into orchestral versions. As this startling new recording reveals, the Janáček can make the transition relatively smoothly, but then again, they're so big, wild, and wonderfully uncouth, they were already bursting the boundaries of the conventional string quartet in the first place.

Based on Leo Tolstoy's most disturbing story after *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Janáček's musical reaction to *The Kreutzer Sonata*, while not in any way an attempt to recount the action scene by scene, nonetheless perfectly captures the mood of this tale of marital indifference vying with murderous jealousy. In Terje Tønnesen's clever adaptation, the pent-up power of the music is released magnificently in the tutti passages, while the more intimate moments are reserved for the solo strings (Tønnesen's superbly expressive violin chief among them). At no point does the music seem bloated or overheated (as if that were *possible* in this piece), with the always alert Norwegian Chamber Orchestra functioning as an enlarged string quartet. Precisely *how* well the arrangement works becomes even more evident in the unusual bonus material: a dramatic reading in English (and Norwegian) of an intelligently-compressed version of Tolstoy's story in which this new arrangement of Janáček's music functions as a kind of film score. Whoever actually picked what music to appear at what specific point had an uncanny grasp of what Janáček may have had in mind, since in every instance the music seems to mirror the written word perfectly. The reading by the Norwegian actor Teodor Janson—whose lightly-accented voice bears a striking resemblance in its timbre and inflections to that of the Oscar-winning Austrian-German actor Christoph Waltz—is a superb one, alternately neurotically impassioned and chillingly controlled.

While considerably less explosive than "The Kreutzer Sonata," No. 2, "Intimate Letters" (*Listy důvěrné*) is the most overt of the composer's expressions of love to Kamila Stösslová, the perfectly ordinary married woman four decades his junior who was willing to correspond with the aging composer but who romantically wouldn't give him the time of day. His passion for Kamila not only led to that string of late masterpieces, but also led him to treat his long-suffering wife Zdenka even more miserably than before. (A previous infatuation had led her to attempt suicide; his sensitive response was to ask for a divorce. Perhaps what shreds of decency were left in the man drew him—perhaps unconsciously—to *The Kreutzer Sonata*.) If Tønnesen's arrangement of "Intimate Letters" might seem marginally less striking, then that could simply be a function of the more subdued nature of the basic material. Needless to say, it's "subdued" only in relation to "The Kreutzer Sonata" as Janáček's second mature quartet, like the first, is among the most impassioned the form itself has to offer.

In short, another ho-hum album this is obviously *not*. **Jim Svejda**

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