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[home](#) > [classical](#) > classical cds weekly: eisler, janáček, ravel

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Classical CDs Weekly: Eisler, Janáček, Ravel

Serious-minded film scores, historically informed French ballet and unmissable string quartets

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

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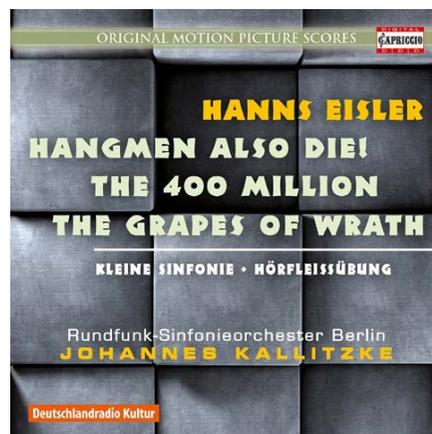
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Terje Tønnesen leading the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra

Eisler: Hangmen Also Die and other film scores Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin/Johannes Kalitzke (Capriccio)

Holed up in Los Angeles, Schoenberg never wrote a Hollywood film score. Unlike his pupil and fellow exile Hanns Eisler, whose music for Fritz Lang's 1944 film *Hangmen Also Die* (with a screenplay by Brecht) was nominated for an Oscar. What was used in the film totals barely 15 minutes, but it's vintage Eisler, a pragmatic, practical blend of late-romanticism and strict dodecaphony. The *Main Title* and a brief *Love Scene* are



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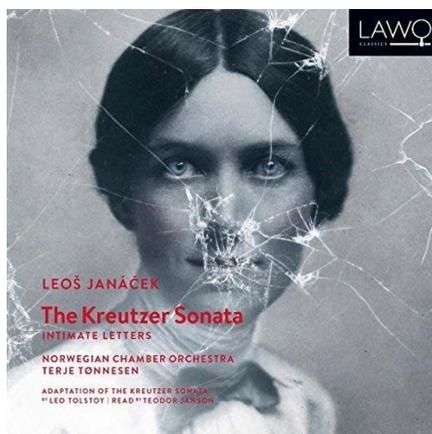


Gurrelieder, Hallé, BBCPO, Elder, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

Super-orchestra and choirs deliver Schoenberg's affirmation of the victory of love

riply enjoyable cheese; far more striking are a very Bergian *Foreword and Landscape and Hradčín* (its shrill chord appearing at the sight of Hitler's portrait) and a few seconds of shrill quirkiness accompanying a glimpse of the mortally wounded Reinhard Heydrich in hospital. Equally striking are fragments of Eisler's alternative score to John Ford's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the spikiness interspersed with slow sections of real beauty and power. Why can't all twelve tone music be this expressive?

Eisler extracted two concert works from his music for *The 400 Million*, a 1939 documentary about the Sino-Japanese War. There's an engaging, tiny Scherzo for violin and orchestra and a set of dour but striking *Five pieces for Orchestra* – published during Eisler's last years in East Germany despite serialism being officially off-limits. More fun is 1932's witty *Kleine Sinfonie*, which really should be heard more often. Excellent performances from Johannes Kalitzke and his Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin.



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

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Daphnis & Chloé on Amazon

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Adès and co bring vibrant humour and bold originality to Beethoven and Barry



LSO, Haitink, Barbican

The venerable conductor grasps the bigger picture, but details are lost

newsletter

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.

Ravel: Daphnis & Chloé Les
Siècles/François-Xavier Roth (Harmonia Mundi)

Apart from the change of label, it's business as usual for François-Xavier Roth's crack French period band. They've recorded zingy live accounts of Stravinsky's three big ballets, so it makes complete sense to move onto Ravel's similarly expansive *Daphnis & Chloé*, too often heard without chorus in truncated form. Listening to the whole score in a sitting demonstrates how tautly constructed this ballet is; Ravel's fastidiousness isn't only evident when he's writing on a smaller scale. Roth's performance shows what it can do within seconds: his very distinctive woodwind solos floating over a carpet of diaphanous string tone. There's some impressive flute work from Marion Ralincourt, her tighter, more focussed sound an asset in music which mustn't sound too baggy and diffuse. Plus, Roth knows how to lift the rhythms and move things along.

Start compiling a list of ear-tickling details and you'll need a long piece of paper. I was bowled over by the very French-sounding bassoons and narrow-bore trombones in the *Danse grotesque de Dorcon* – how refreshing to hear Ravel's actual notes rather than well-upholstered murk. And the banshee-like winds in a very nimble *Danse guerrière*. This music has rarely been played with such panache; it's hard to imagine performances in Ravel's lifetime being this free of fluffs. The third section's dawn chorus are brilliantly characterised, leading to an uproarious, punchy *Danse générale*. Vocals, from Ensemble Aedes, are nicely-balanced, and technically it all sounds wonderful, despite the recording being assembled from performances in multiple venues. You'd never guess. And anoraks will appreciate the list of instruments deployed, from a 1913 six-valved tuba to a pair of Érard harps. We could really do with a bonus DVD.

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