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Strauss: Don Juan (SACD review)

Also, Death and Transfiguration, Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks. Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Reference Recordings Fresh FR-707SACD.



The thing is, these tone poems from German composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949) are so famous and so often recorded, most classical-music fans probably already have multiple favorite copies of them. So how are newcomers to the scene like Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra supposed to compete with the likes of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony (RCA), Bernard Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra (Philips), or Rudolf Kempe and the Staatskapelle Dresden (EMI)? Well, what Maestro Honeck and his team offer are vigorous performances and excellent, live, hybrid multichannel SACD sound. Whether that is enough to tempt you in their direction is another story.

The program begins with *Don Juan*, Op. 20, the 1888 work that put a young Strauss on the map. The piece builds a tone portrait of the legendary Spanish lover, a portrait whose swashbuckling music harks back to Liszt's *Les Preludes* and looks forward to Korngold's *The Sea Hawk* and Williams's *Star Wars*.

Maestro Honeck attacks the more-heroic aspects of the score with strength and vigor, making them sound as vital as under any baton. The quieter sections he takes rather routinely, however, so you won't get quite the contrasting nuances you will find with a few other conductors. With Honeck it's all about the excitement.

Next, we find *Death and Transfiguration*, Op. 24, from 1889, where we see an increase in the maturity of the subject matter if not always in the inspiration of the music. The piece describes a dying man thinking back on his life: the innocence of his childhood, the struggles of his adulthood, the achievement of material goals, and, finally, a long-desired transfiguration "from the infinite reaches of heaven." It combines some of the heroics of *Don Juan* with a degree of introspection and sentimentality to create a poignant look at passing.

In *Death and Transfiguration* Honeck is all about introspection and soul-searching, starting with those long, drawn-out breaths at the start of the piece. The music can easily slip into the maudlin, but Honeck

manages to make it more reflective than overtly emotional. Strauss's widow said that on her husband's deathbed he told her that dying was just as he had described it in music so many years before. If that's the case, it's both dreadful and peaceful, ominous and tranquil, dramatic and serene, at least in Honeck's hands, and he builds a commendably steady momentum as the work unfolds. The conclusion is as touching as any I've heard.

The last item on the disc is *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Op. 28, from 1895. It's a rollicking tale that ends in misfortune for the unfortunate rascal Till Eulenspiegel and his misadventures. Honeck appears to see Till as an inelegant, rough-hewn type who believes his winning smile can get him through any mischief. It's here the conductor seems most happy, most forceful, most rustic and charming, the program thus finishing up on a strong note. Interestingly, too, while all three pieces on the disc conclude with the hero's death, it is in Honeck's handling of *Till Eulenspiegel* that we see most clearly the striking significance of that end.

Three unusual aspects of this 2013 Reference Recordings release are (1) Reference Recordings didn't make it, Soundmirror, Boston did, and the folks at Reference Recordings are helping to distribute it under their label; (2) Soundmirror recorded it live; and (3) the disc is a hybrid stereo/multichannel SACD, which Reference Recordings at this time were only just starting to get into. Producer Dirk Sobotka and engineers Mark Donahue, Ray Clover, and John Newton recorded the music at Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in June 2012 using five omnidirectional DPA 4006 microphones, supplemented by spot mikes and post produced in 64fs DSD on a Pyramix workstation. Soundmirror has done a lot of good work before, receiving a ton of Grammy nominations, and the current disc is no exception if you enjoy the experience of live sound.

In the compatible SACD stereo mode to which I listened, the sonics were extremely dynamic and clear, if at the expense of a somewhat close-up perspective and a very minor degree of brightness in the upper midrange. Nevertheless, I found splendid definition, a good bass and treble extension, strong transient impact, and a spacious stereo spread. Insofar as concerns audience noise, I heard none. And no disruptive applause, either. John Puccio