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## SACD REVIEW

### Richard Strauss

#### Tone Poems

*Don Juan*, Op. 20

*Death and Transfiguration*, Op. 24

*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, Op. 28

**Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck**  
Reference Recordings fresh! FR-707 Hybrid Multichannel SACD



Let's be very clear here; this is what Strauss should sound like. After the dreadfully mediocre Berlin Philharmonic recording on DG with a clearly overmatched Gustavo Dudamel in tow, this Reference Recordings release is just the ticket for relief. Now that the Pittsburgh Symphony has signed on with this pioneering label, let us hope they get some more exposure. They've never been highly touted; not on Philips, EMI, Columbia, or even PentaTone, where they recorded

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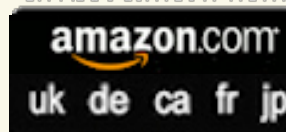
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What's New for  
**September 2014?**

some magnificent work under Marek Janowski. Since his appointment in 2007, Manfred Honeck has really made the orchestra his own, and they are clearly one of the very best orchestras in the world right now.

In all respects, these players outshine their more famous Berlin colleagues. Mind you, the Berlin Philharmonic still sports world-class strings and a glorious performance tradition in music such as this. As it stands now though, the superior ensemble as a whole is to be found in Pittsburgh, with absolutely radiant brass playing and winds that ooze character. The recorded sound flatters all sections, and allows for the maximum amount of color to come rushing out of your speakers. It's not all virtuoso bombast, either. *Don Juan* isn't played for sheer speed as much as it looks to tell a story. The playing is still amazing, but to my ears the more measured tempo feels faster than it actually is, thanks to careful phrasing and outstanding ensemble balance. You can actually hear *everything*, in all it's masterfully scored, perfectly executed glory. Some might prefer a swifter *Don*, but better this than dull! I dare you not to be impressed.

In *Death and Transfiguration* we find the various moods and dynamics of this massive tone poem effortlessly handled by Honeck and his players. Unlike Dudamel, Honeck infuses the music with a real sense of purpose throughout the program. While the Berlin players seemingly lean on their reputation, Pittsburgh's band clearly has something to prove. Thus the climaxes are genuinely exciting; the transfiguration is beyond gorgeous and there is every feeling that this is something very special. The horns, which have made this orchestra so renowned in Mahler and Brahms, make the last few minutes of the piece go from exceptional to unforgettable. And it's clear by the end that Pittsburgh's string section is nothing to sneeze at, either. It's like Karajan's classic readings, only in better sound and a more natural orchestral picture. Fantastic.

Finally, a *Eulenspiegel* that actually sounds as merry as the title suggests ends the disc on a delightful high. Again, the brass play their hearts out, but the other sections are just as well captured and virtuosic. The winds dance, the strings sing, and not for a moment are you bored. Again, Honeck has a really strong sense of what he wants to do; he let's his orchestra do the talking and stays out of the way. This is a high compliment in Strauss, and the conductor's willingness to simply let his players play and focus on keeping things clear and purposeful ensures that nothing gets in the way of the excellence on display. I only listened in stereo, but it's audiophile quality nevertheless. Superlative, and a great start to an exciting new partnership.

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