

<http://www.fanfaremag.com/content/view/54017/10262/>

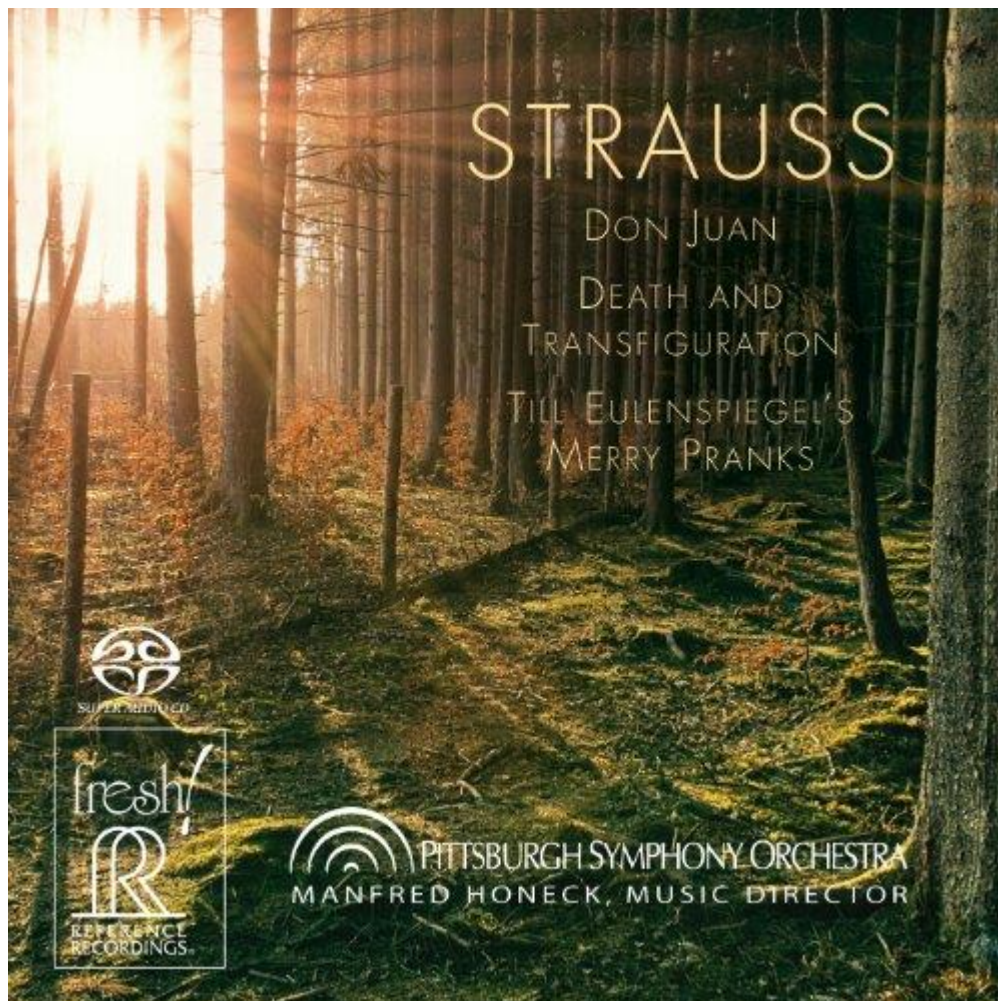
Manfred Honeck: STRAUSS Don Juan. Death and Transfiguration. Till... on
REFERENCE



Classical Reviews - Composers & Works

Sunday, 09 February 2014

R. STRAUSS Don Juan. Death and Transfiguration. Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche •
Manfred Honeck, cond; Pittsburgh SO • REFERENCE 707 (SACD: 59:26) Live: Pittsburgh
6/8–10/2012



[Tone Poems / Don Juan / Death & Transfiguration](#)

[Audio CD; Hybrid SACD - DSD](#)

[Reference Recordings](#)

[Buy now from Amazon](#)

This is the first in a series of live SACDs highlighting a new association between Reference Recordings (RR) and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. RR will not record them, and Keith Johnson is not the engineer. This is a manufacturing and distribution deal with engineering by a Sound/Mirror team. These Pittsburgh recordings are part of a larger series called "FRESH!" reflecting RR's mission to "encourage artists and give them a strong platform for promotion and sales nationally and internationally."

The program notes are unusually interesting because they are written by conductor Manfred Honeck. He outlines some of his thoughts on the three Richard Strauss tone poems, including areas where he makes changes to accentuate his vision, for example at the end of Don Juan and in the trial scene of Till Eulenspiegel. At times like this, the image of Leopold Stokowski revising scores and orchestration comes to mind. When you add Honeck's controversial tempos, it becomes apparent that these interpretations are not for purists

Honeck correctly emphasizes light and transparent instrumental textures in Till Eulenspiegel, but his performance is definitely not laid back or underplayed. This Till is a devilish rogue. Honeck's frequent changes in tempo and phrasing reflect the different aspects of his character, ranging from funny, to naughty, to malicious. The French horn player has no problems with his treacherous solo. The clarinet in the trial scene playing an octave higher than written (as per Honeck) for audibility does work well.

At well over 18 minutes, this Don Juan is similar in length to Gustavo Dudamel's recent version with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Where Dudamel seems to be plodding through the work in a mannered fashion, Honeck emphasizes effective dynamic contrasts with a forceful and propulsive opening followed by a slow and lovely middle section with outstanding contributions from the orchestra's woodwind players. The big horn call will be too slow for some listeners, but it is very well played and sounds magnificent in Honeck's expansive reading of the climax. The conductor's emphasis of the final quivering strings sounds fine.

Death and Transfiguration will be special for some listeners and too subjective for others. The quiet sections are hauntingly beautiful with some magnificent solo woodwinds, and the turbulent parts crackle with excitement, aided by timpani that are suitably prominent but not overdone. Honeck follows the tam-tam marking the moment of death with a prolonged pause. He plays the Transfiguration theme extremely slowly, and the two organ-like ascending chords just before the climax have rarely sounded so luscious. Indeed, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra plays like a world-class ensemble in all three works.

The excellent sound has no major weaknesses, and that is critical for a concert of Strauss's orchestral music. The orchestra is presented with an upfront aural perspective, but there is adequate width and depth to the sound field. The numerous instrumental solos are invariably well focused. The bass drum is powerful and well integrated with the rest of the orchestra, but does not have the massive impact of the typical RR bass drum. But where did that aggressive bass drum thwack in the middle of Death and Transfiguration come from?

These are all excellent and highly subjective interpretations that should be in any serious Straussian's collection. In a way they are similar to Leonard Bernstein's subjective Mahler performances, but Lenny did not alter the scoring. The sound is worthy of RR's high standards, though it is qualitatively different. This is strongly recommended even if some listeners will also want to have more conventional interpretations by committed Straussians such as Fritz Reiner, Karl Böhm, and Herbert von Karajan. Arthur Lintgen

Last Updated (Sunday, 09 February 2014)