

## Pittsburgh Weighs In

- 
- 

Category: Richard Freed's "Keepers"

Created on Saturday, 01 February 2014 00:00

Written by Richard Freed



This feature called “Keepers” has focused for the most part on recordings that have been around for a while, and in fact on more than a few no longer in the active catalogue but very much worth hunting for. Questions arise from time to time regarding whether we may expect recordings being made now, in the second decade of the 21st century, to become “keepers” -- and this opens up related speculation as to which musicians performing today are likely to become “legendary” figures, as well as on the status of the recording industry itself.

Do we have a wealth of the kind of musicians today who light our emotional fires, or has that kind of music-making been superseded by a new breed for whom the “correct” is sufficient, and even preferred, among both performers themselves and the associated individuals calling the shots and making judgments?

Who would have dreamed, say, 20 years ago, that the long dominant American recording companies RCA Victor and Columbia, after being taken over by, respectively, a German

publishing house and a Japanese electronic giant, would merge, with foreseeably disruptive consequences, or that EMI would be dissolved and its various divisions go to different owners? In the by no means distant past, record companies were created and staffed by individuals brought up on a love for and deep understanding of music. More than a few were actually musicians themselves. Today that phenomenon continues mainly among the dogged “independents” and specialist labels.

Who, indeed, would have dreamed, even five years ago, that the Minnesota Orchestra, one of the most consistently fine such aggregations on our continent -- indeed the one, under its original name Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, whose success in recording under the young Eugene Ormandy in the 1930s not only established its own worldwide reputation but triggered the large-scale revival of orchestral recording in the US in the difficult years of the Great Depression -- would come so close to pulling the plug on itself, cancelling nearly two entire seasons and impelling its distinguished music director to resign? It is only now, on the date this article is posted, that a new contract, painfully but determinedly arrived at, goes into effect, enabling a restored orchestra to resume its function as a massive sigh of relief salutes the determination and support of a community outstanding for its understanding and enthusiastic support of its cultural/artistic institutions. And, just in time to certify this resolution of this near-death experience, the Minnesota Orchestra's BIS recording of Sibelius's First and Fourth Symphonies, under the aforementioned distinguished conductor, Osmo Vänskä, won this year's Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance.

A generation from now, will anyone be seeking out physical discs (or downloads) of Simon Rattle's Beethoven or Sibelius symphonies, as fervid collectors pursue Hermann Scherchen's electrifying recording of Beethoven's music for Goethe's *Egmont*? That incomparable *Egmont* has reappeared on at least two labels rather outside the mainstream, but by now the knowledgeable market for such things has diminished to the point of leaving such noble pursuits to the non-profit wing.

Does anyone today even hear the difference between the exalted realizations of the waltz poems of Johann and Josef Strauss under the hands of the irreplaceable Clemens Krauss (who founded the Vienna Philharmonic tradition of New Year concerts, and who died in 1954, after making the first three of Decca's New Year Concert LPs -- not live, at that time, but under studio conditions) and today's dismissively unknowing and under-rehearsed accounts of these masterworks by the celebrity du jour?

Most of these questions may have to wait for the judgment of history, but in the turmoil of the recording industry, more than a few important orchestras in the US, the UK and Continental Europe -- e.g., the Chicago SO, San Francisco SO, London SO, London Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw, Bavarian Radio SO -- have created their own labels (many with the word “Live” in the label name, acknowledging the concert origin of the recordings) and in some instances have set up their own distribution systems. And going this route has not been as great a leap as some may have assumed. In the US, most recording orchestras have been paying their own musical costs, anyway (some of them under an “electronic services” clause in the contracts with their musicians), and more than a few engaged their own recording producers and

engineers, while others simply hired the teams that had been producing their broadcasts, or their recordings for commercial labels.

Some of the orchestras that operate their own labels have also continued to record for commercial labels, and now and then an interesting sort of compromise approach comes into the mix. What is of interest in this respect just now is the Pittsburgh SO's new arrangement with Reference Recordings. In one sense, there is nothing new here: the PSO has undertaken to make its own recordings and place them on an established and respected label. While there is nothing new in so doing, what the initial product of this particular arrangement shows is a composite of various more or less familiar approaches, tailored, one might say, to the objectives of this specific institution -- and it has come about in large part because of a new departure on the part of the host label itself.

What is truly different here is that the label in question, Reference Recordings, had built its reputation entirely in the realm of the audiophile, which is to say, on *its own* engineering and production skills, which have little or no direct involvement in this project. Tam Henderson, who founded RR and produced most of its sessions, and Keith Johnson, his brilliant engineer, developed approaches and techniques that yielded virtually unparalleled spaciousness and all-round realism. Johnson, in fact, was one of the creators of HDCD (High Definition Compatible Digital), a process simpler than SACD and regarded by more than a few experienced listeners as a superior option. That the matter of sound quality was consistently RR's primary focus is borne out by the company's eventual branching out into audiophile-quality LP editions of orchestral material from the Vox catalog: the St. Louis SO under Leonard Slatkin, the Minnesota Orchestra under Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (recordings which other audiophile labels -- *e.g.*, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab and Chad Kassem's Analogue Productions -- have also undertaken to buff up on CD and in some instances in SACD, some of the CDs involving the participation of Marc Aubort, the renowned engineer for Vox's original QS quadrasonic sessions).

The disc at hand, a collection of Strauss tone poems (*Don Juan, Death and Transfiguration, Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*) performed by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under its music director Manfred Honeck, is part of a recently instituted series called "FRESH! from RR." As RR's vice president Marcia Martin stated in a press release announcing this series, it is made up of recordings not produced by the RR team itself, but RR does "endeavor to have input prior to recording, and to have a hands-on role in editing, post-production and/or mastering phases of production . . ." Releases in this series have catalog numbers with the letter prefix FR, to distinguish them from the company's own productions, which continue to be assigned the familiar RR prefix. The Pittsburgh Strauss collection, FR-707SACD, was produced in the indicated format by the Boston-based firm Soundmirror; one of RR's post-production touches was to add HDCD to the CD stereo layer.

The PSO's earlier recordings under Manfred Honeck -- symphonies of Mahler and Tchaikovsky, and some more Strauss -- were made by the Japanese audiophile label Exton, which has built up an impressive catalog of orchestral recordings by orchestras in Tokyo, Sydney, Stockholm and elsewhere under Vladimir Ashkenazy; by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic under both Ashkenazy and the Finnish conductor Sakari Oramo, and by the Czech Philharmonic under Zdeněk Macal -- generally featuring works for BIG orchestra, by such composers as Strauss,

Bruckner, Ravel, and Mahler. (US distribution for Exton, by the way, has just passed from Allegro, which also distributes RR, to Naxos.) Exton had engaged Soundmirror for some of its own Pittsburgh recordings, and in that sense the PSO continues that relationship.

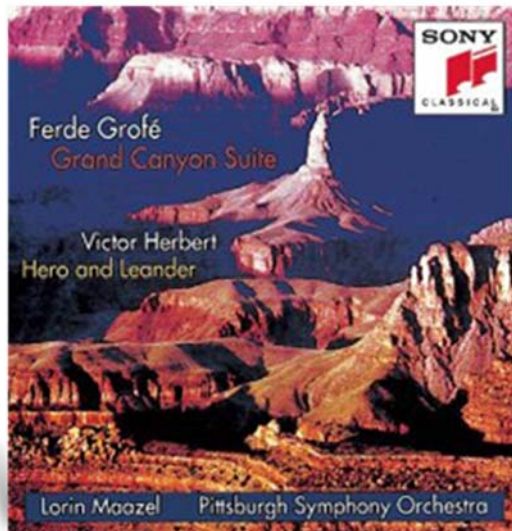


Like many of Exton's recordings, those on the new RR disc were made during actual concerts. (The packaging includes the phrase "Pittsburgh Live!") Exton had been somewhat inconsistent on the question of including applause. I'm happy to report that there is no applause to break the spell of the music on the RR release under discussion. The Soundmirror sound for Honeck's Strauss is big and impressive -- and also rather different from what Keith Johnson had established as RR's own sound.

The important point is that the PSO itself has insisted on high sonic standards. This is, after all, an orchestra of considerable distinction, with a long history and an impressive discography. The PSO traces its origins to a Pittsburgh Orchestra founded in 1895. One of its early conductors was the great Victor Herbert, remembered primarily of course as the composer of operettas -- *Naughty Marietta*, *The Red Mill*, *Babes in Toyland*, *Mademoiselle Modiste*, and a long list of others. Herbert also composed two full-fledged operas, and a number of concert works. His Second Cello Concerto, which he introduced himself as soloist with the New York Philharmonic (he was cellist in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for a time), was all the stimulus his friend Dvořák needed to compose his own great Cello Concerto in B minor, and some three decades later Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was not the only new work commissioned by Paul Whiteman for his famous concert billed as "An Experiment in Modern Music," on Lincoln's Birthday 1924, which included the premiere of Herbert's *Suite of Serenades* as well.

Herbert was a respected conductor, not only with the Pittsburgh Orchestra, but as successor to the famous Patrick S. Gilmore as director of the 22nd Regiment Band. His successor in Pittsburgh was Emil Paur, who had served as conductor of the New York Philharmonic, and was Dvořák's successor as director of the National Conservatory in New York (where Herbert was on the faculty). Over the decades there were various interruptions and fresh starts in Pittsburgh's orchestral activity. The most significant one was the Pittsburgh SO as formed in 1926: following ten years under the now forgotten Elias Breeskin (to 1930) and then Antonio Modarelli, no less a figure than Otto Klemperer was brought it for a thorough reorganization which set the PSO on its

very assured way. Fritz Reiner presided for ten eventful years, and then the remarkable William Steinberg came in 1952 and stayed for 24 years, during which period he also held shorter appointments with the London Philharmonic and the Boston SO; among his successors before Honeck's arrival were such renowned conductors as André Previn, Lorin Maazel and Mariss Jansons.



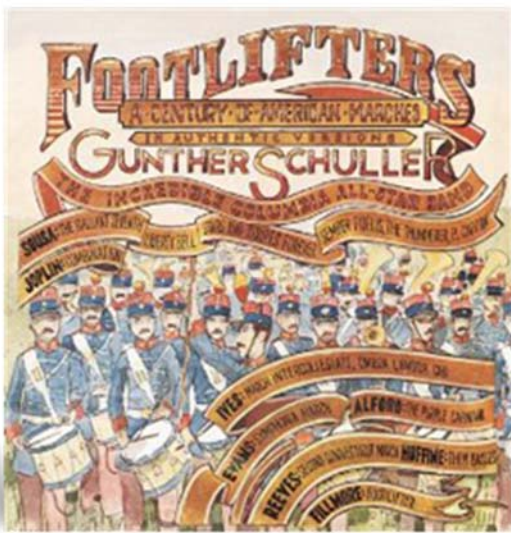
All of these great conductors made recordings in Pittsburgh. Reiner made many worth remembering, on Columbia 78s: symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven and Shostakovich, some truly stunning Wagner, tone poems of Richard Strauss, some waltzes by the more lovable Johann Strauss, and one of the earliest recordings of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, a work he had a significant part in bringing into the world (by arranging for the Koussevitzky Foundation to commission it). After leaving Pittsburgh, Reiner remade much of his PSO discography in Chicago, in much more opulent stereophonic sound, but at least two of the most striking, and surely the most unexpected, titles in his Pittsburgh discography were not remade by him anywhere: an absolute dream performance of Richard Rodgers's *Carousel Waltz* (in the splendid Don Rose arrangement) and one of the earliest recordings of Robert Russell Bennett's "Symphonic Picture" of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. (Columbia did reissue the latter on a short-lived LP.)

(According to a violinist who played under Reiner in Pittsburgh, the legendary telescope incident actually took place, and it happened during a PSO rehearsal. Reiner, remember, was known for his "vest pocket beat," a technique quite different from the more overtly dramatic gestures of some other conductors, and at this particular rehearsal, a double bass player pulled out a telescope to find that small beat, much to the amusement of his colleagues, but less so to Reiner himself -- who did smile, however, as he held up a card to be read through the telescope, on which he had written, "You are fired.")

It was Steinberg who took the PSO into the realm of high-fidelity recording, beginning well into the LP era with Capitol, then with a number of stereophonic showpieces for Command, EMI and Everest. All those, and the recordings under his successors, bear out the judgment of Yuri Temirkanov, the chief conductor of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. In an interview with Herbert Glass, published in the very last issue of the big *Schwann Inside* (dated spring 2000, just

after the Russian conductor had begun his brief but significant tenure with the Baltimore SO). In discussing American orchestras, and his own experience with them, Temirkanov remarked (through his translator), “As regards balance of sections, of uniform strength, the orchestra that immediately comes to mind is the Pittsburgh Symphony.”

RR now is not only planning more from Pittsburgh, but has issued some lighter fare from other performers who were not recorded by its own team: this material, too, is identified by the code word “Fresh!” and the prefix FR. While all of Manfred Honeck’s Pittsburgh recordings so far are of well established repertory favorites, it will be of special interest to see whether the Reiner/Steinberg level of adventurousness in contemporary material will be revived -- and, since Victor Herbert does loom in the general background, whether Lorin Maazel’s nod to him might be emulated in the future.



Maazel himself was a Pittsburgher, long before he took over the orchestra. When his teacher, Vladimir Bakaleinikoff, moved there from Los Angeles, the Maazel family followed, and after conducting some of the nation’s top orchestras while still in short pants, LM actually became a member of the PSO violin section, and then its apprentice conductor, before launching his podium career in Europe. Maazel not only knew of Victor Herbert’s significance in the city’s musical past, but during his own tenure as music director of the PSO he recorded Herbert’s tone poem *Hero and Leander*, paired with Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* (SK52491).

In addition to the several other concert works by Victor Herbert (and at least one film score), which might be similarly appropriate for this orchestra to address, we might have the march that Herbert wrote as part of his operetta treatment of Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The Gold Bug*. Not much of that score was even published, but the march *bearing the same title*, created for the 22nd Regiment Band when Herbert was its director, now exists in a performing edition by our own Rad Bennett, whose birthday, no doubt significantly in this context, falls on the same date as Victor Herbert’s own -- the very date, as it happens, on which this edition of “Keepers” is posted. Meanwhile, the Goldman Band’s recording of the piece is part of an already available certified “Keeper,” *Footlifters*, a Sony CD (SK 94887) on which Gunther Schuller conducts “the

Incredible Columbia All Star Band” in 14 glorious march classics, and the Goldman Band performs *The Gold Bug* and four additional lesser-known gems.

. . . *Richard Freed*

[richardf@soundstagenetwork.com](mailto:richardf@soundstagenetwork.com)