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Classical Music Reviews by John J. Puccio



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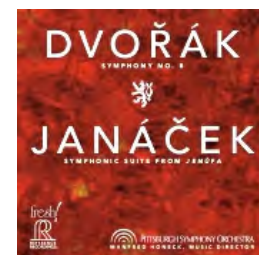
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Dvorak: Symphony No. 8 (SACD review)

Also, Janacek: Symphonic Suite from Jenufa. Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Reference Recordings Fresh! FR-710SACD.

Of Dvorak's nine symphonies, it's the last three that have always been the most popular with audiences, with the final symphony, "From the New World," getting the most attention. That's probably the way it should be; people know what they like and generally pick winners. But my own favorites have long been both No. 8 and No. 9, so I always welcome new recordings of them, if only to see how they stack up against my previous favorites. This new rendering of No. 8 by Manfred Honeck and his Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on a live Reference Recordings Fresh! hybrid SACD stacks up pretty well.



Czech composer Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) wrote his Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88 in 1889, and Maestro Honeck considers it the "most Czech" of all his symphonies. That is, the piece sounds cheerful and poetic, the composer keeping its style and structure in the Czech-romantic tradition and drawing his inspiration from the Bohemian folk tunes of his native country.

Honeck doesn't go at a breakneck pace through the first-movement Allegro con brio but instead varies his tempo considerably to create a fairly lively, even thrilling account of the score. There is great exuberance in the conductor's handling of the various themes, while the sounds of nature, like the birdsong of the flute, create a truly sweet atmosphere.

Dvorak marked the second movement an Adagio (in slow, leisurely time), but hardly any conductor plays it too slowly. Indeed, most conductors in my experience take it a moderate, even heady pace. But Honeck takes the composer at his word and plays most of the section at a reasonably slow speed. Not that this has any deleterious effect on the outcome, however, because he continues to introduce enough changes of tempo and dynamics within this slow structure to keep our attention from flagging. For example, Honeck lowers the volume to such an extent along about the middle of the movement that you'd think your speakers had just gone dead, which only serves to heighten the excitement when the music comes back full force.

In the third-movement Allegretto grazioso we get a kind of dumka (a Slavic folk ballad alternating between sadness and gaiety), here rendered as a vaguely melancholic waltz, which Honeck handles brilliantly. The music sounds charming and bucolic, lyric, lilting, and folksy, with a wonderfully delicate, rhythmic motion.

Finally, we get a fourth-movement Allegro con non troppo in which Honeck exercises his usual bent for flexible tempos more than ever. As he points out in a booklet note, Slavic

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dances tend to speed up at the end, so he slows and quickens his pace accordingly, even if the composer didn't specifically indicate such. Again, it creates an enthralling effect and makes Honeck's interpretation a little different from those we usually hear.



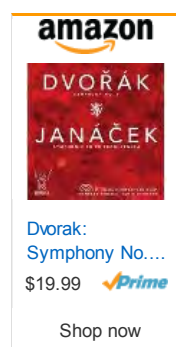
Still, the question remains: Does Honeck displace other contenders in this repertoire? For my taste, I continue to favor more traditional yet delightful renditions from Sir John Barbirolli (EMI), Libor Pesek (Virgin), Sir Colin Davis (Philips), Istvan Kertesz (Decca), Rafael Kubelik (DG), and a few others. However, for your own taste Honeck may be just the antidote for a score that has grown stale from hearing it so much.

Because Dvorak's Eighth Symphony is relatively short, there is time for a reasonably lengthy coupling. Here we find a symphonic suite from the opera Jenůfa by Dvorak's fellow Czech composer Leos Janacek (1854-1928). The suite comprises a twenty-two minute set of selections chosen by Maestro Honeck to represent the most important moments of the opera. Since the opera is rather grim, expect some sorrow, gloom, and melodrama. Nevertheless, it is also quite colorful music, filled with a bit of swirling boisterousness, too, and under Honeck it makes an especially entertaining piece of music. Love that xylophone.

The production team of Soundmirror, Boston--Dirk Sobatka, Mark Donahue, John Newton, and Harold Chambers--recorded the music live at Heinz Hall, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in October 2013, and Reference Recordings Live! released it on a hybrid stereo/multichannel SACD in 2014. Soundmirror, with over eighty Grammy nominations and awards to their credit, obviously know a thing or two about fine recordings, and insofar as live recordings go, this one is quite good. While it is fairly close up in the manner of most live recordings, it seldom sounds bright or edgy. In fact, in the two-channel stereo mode to which I listened, it's mostly rather smooth and warm, with plenty of midrange transparency. If one didn't sense the presence of an audience through their breathing and occasional wheezing, one might think this were a studio recording. An absence of closing applause helps as well.

JJP

To listen to a brief excerpt from this album, click here:



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John J. Puccio



About the Author

I've been listening to classical music most of my life, starting with the classical excerpts on The Big John and Sparkie radio show in the early Fifties and the purchase of my first classical recording, The 101 Strings Play the Classics, around 1956. In the late Sixties I began teaching high school English and Film Studies as well as becoming interested in hi-fi, my audio ambitions graduating me from a pair of AR-3 speakers to the Fulton J's recommended by The Stereophile's J. Gordon Holt. In the early Seventies, I began writing for a number of audio magazines, including Audio Excellence, Audio Forum, The Boston Audio Society Speaker, The American Record Guide, and from 1976 until 2008, The \$ensible Sound, for which I served as Classical Music Editor. Today, I'm retired from teaching and using a pair of VMPS RM40s. In addition to writing the Classical Candor blog, I served as the Movie Review Editor for the Web site Movie Metropolis (moviemet.com, formerly DVD TOWN) from 1997-2013. Music and movies. Life couldn't be better.

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Mission Statement

It is the goal of Classical Candor to promote the enjoyment of classical music. Other forms of music come and go—minuets, waltzes, ragtime, blues, jazz, bebop, country-western, rock-'n'-roll, heavy metal, rap, and the rest—but classical music has been around for hundreds of years and will continue to be around for hundreds more. It's no accident that every major city in the world has one or more symphony orchestras.

When I was young, I heard it said that only intellectuals could appreciate classical music, that it required dedicated concentration to appreciate. Nonsense. I'm no intellectual, and I've always loved classical music. Anyone who's ever seen and enjoyed Disney's *Fantasia* or a Looney Tunes cartoon playing Rossini's *William Tell Overture* or Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* can attest to the power and joy of classical music, and that's just about everybody.

So, if Classical Candor can expand one's awareness of classical music and bring more joy to one's life, more power to it. It's done its job.

Contact Information

Readers with polite, courteous, helpful letters may send them to pucciojj@gmail.com.

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