

 SACD Review

Fresh!



- [Antonin Dvořák](#): Symphony #8 in E minor, Op. 88
- [Leoš Janáček](#): Symphonic Suite from "Jenůfa"

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck
Reference Recordings Fresh! SACD FR-710 Hybrid Multichannel

Given the universal excellence of this team in Mahler (historically as well as recently) I was excited by the prospect of the originally announced Bruckner #4 from these forces. So it came as a surprise to find this pairing in the mail. Manfred Honeck has showed a deep sympathy for Czech music on disc, and there's not really anything he can't do with this orchestra. To my ears though, this cannot match the superb results of the Strauss tone poems this crew released last year.

One of the things I like best about Honeck is that he usually allows the music to speak for itself. The Dvořák is phrased in the most beautiful way; radiantly recorded, the Pittsburgh Symphony simply shines. Unfortunately, the conductor does not allow the music to flow as naturally as I prefer. There are some unusual dynamic shifts – particularly in the outer movements – that were obviously intended for musical impact and excitement. Honeck is too smart a musician to do otherwise. Regrettably, I'm not sure it turns out that way. I'm thinking of Osmo Vanska's exceptional Beethoven cycle on BIS, where every detail was so carefully planned that it sometimes turned into micromanagement. That's what occurs here, and it shows. The last movement in particular, while showing admirable clarity in the bass lines and richness beyond compare in the lower strings, ends up as a stop-and-start affair in the repeated middle sections. Pity that, the final pages are explosive and fully convincing.

Aside from that, the inner movements demonstrate nothing less than a world-class band at their peak. There is simply stunning execution throughout, and Honeck's decisions may or may not bother you the way that they did me. Compare his #8 to Kubelik, and you find music in the latter's account that flows like oil on water. But this is individual, even distinctive depending on your view. But considering how tremendously Honeck backed Anne-Sophie Mutter in her recording of the same composers' Violin Concerto, I cannot help but be a little surprised at the degree of personalization here, not always to the music's benefit.

On the other hand, the Janáček is a neat and rarely heard coupling that naturally lends itself less to overt manipulation. I like these two composers together on disc, and kudos to all for an unusual choice of repertoire. Honeck and his collaborators have created a fine suite for us, and realistically this is the most reasonable way to approach this music. The playing and recording quality remain superb here. Pittsburgh, as I've written before, is really in a golden age regardless of who they work with. Warm, lush strings compliment equally warm (but always assertive) brass and winds. I hear that there are other ways to arrange this music, but this works just fine and certainly makes an interesting pairing.

Quite a few critics have given their thoughts on this disc since the time I began this review, and in many ways their thoughts are slightly more positive. I have not changed my views, and I'm still not entirely happy with the Eighth Symphony. But once again the playing and production values are absolutely first-rate. This is a worthy addition to your collection, and maybe for you a reference edition.

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