

Enjoy the Music.com®

Dvorak: Symphony No. 8

Janacek: Symphonic Suite from Jenufa (arr. Honick/Ille)

Manfred Honeck, conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony

[Review By Joe Milicia](#)

It would be great to have more program notes like the one in Reference Recordings' new Pittsburgh Symphony release, with the conductor commenting in detail on his own interpretation of the music. There have been magnificent recordings of Antonin Dvorak's Eighth Symphony—Giulini/Chicago and Kubelik/Berlin come first to mind—but Manfred Honeck has some very distinctive ideas about what this symphony should sound like, and thanks to RR's capture of his superb orchestra, we can hear the realization of those ideas. A bonus is a 23-minute suite derived from Leos Janacek's opera *Jenufa*, "conceptualized" by Honeck himself and "realized" by composer/orchestrator Tomas Ille.

Honeck considers the Eighth the most "Czech" of all Dvorak's symphonies, the earlier ones being more Germanic and the Ninth of course deriving itself "from the New World." There is surely room for debate about the other symphonies, but certainly the Eighth is saturated with the sounds of Czech folk music—and as Honeck hears it, with nature sounds as well. (Dvorak wrote it after moving to a country house.) You know this is not going to be "just another" Dvorak Eighth as soon as you hear the flute solo early in the first movement: it's played with so much rubato that it sounds like the bird calls in Mahler's Third Symphony (where the score calls for flute and Eb clarinet to ad-lib their tempos). Actually, the preceding songful opening of the symphony—Honeck calls it "melancholy"—is already given a distinctive phrasing to set up the greatest contrast to the joyful flute melody. In places throughout the symphony Honeck employs considerable rubato: for example, the clarinets' triplet figure when they answer those other bird calls (flutes and oboes) in the second movement; and more extremely, midway through the scherzo when the violins take us back to the opening waltz tune.

Honeck is flexible in general with tempos, and feels no compulsion to follow Dvorak's metronome markings. The trumpet fanfare that opens the Finale is a bit slower than the score calls for, and the strings-and-bassoon passages that follow are a great deal slower, while the tutti that follows is a bit faster than marked, and what Honeck calls the "polka" section is even faster. Incidentally, he also calls for the violas to play their "snare-drum" rhythm at the beginning of this polka col legno (with the wood of the bow), though the RR engineers don't bring out this detail enough for it to be really noticeable. (Without Honeck's notes I also couldn't claim that this section was being played in the style of a Slavic polka rather than an Austrian one, but I did enjoy the jubilant performance.) Honeck also takes the liberty of speeding up the coda of the first movement, in the style of a stretta of a Slavic dance, though surely this is not an unusual choice among conductors.

The main part of the waltz-scherzo (*Allegretto grazioso*) is on the fast side—notably faster than the tempo marking—but it is played in such a graceful and yet sweeping manner that it would be churlish to complain. The first violins play a little glissando up to the third note of the polka-like coda of the scherzo, "to reflect the fresh and rustic sound of the countryside. The effect is very simple, but funny, and captures the boisterous and high-spirited manner that is so characteristic of the Czech style." Listeners will also hear more portamento in this movement than is typical of modern performances, and more legato among the winds in a few places where staccato is the norm.

On a first hearing I found the performance overall to be consistently interesting but a bit studied—"carefully" different. But on further hearings I've come to appreciate its fresh, "natural" qualities, and especially its exuberance and dramatic flair. Above all, it brings out Dvorak's tremendous originality: no other symphony, even the composer's others, sounds like this.

As a bonus we are given a "Symphonic Suite" from *Jenufa*: "symphonic" in the sense that the excerpts from the opera are played without pause, with some of them linked by a motif on the xylophone. (There is a 31-minute suite arranged by Peter Breiner, who also conducts it with the New Zealand Symphony for the Naxos label, but I haven't heard it.) Janacek wrote an overture to *Jenufa*, which he called *Jealousy* when he offered it as a concert piece. This is not included in Honeck's "conceptualization," but several dances are, as well as the stormy finale of Act II and the ecstatic conclusion of Act III. The Pittsburgh Symphony plays splendidly throughout the suite, but I'm not sure that all of it works as concert music. The dances from the opera are lively enough, but music derived from arias seems flat on its own, and the finale, which is one of the most thrilling in all opera, seems to need the human voice, or to grow inexorably from the rest of the act, to have its full impact. (Oddly, the movements of the suite are not listed in the booklet or on the cover—it's all one track—but I happened upon a short online article listing the movements and the instrumentation [at this link](#).)

As with RR's previous "Pittsburgh Live!" CD, of Richard Strauss tone poems, the orchestra is recorded with tremendous clarity and a slightly distant perspective. (The booklet contains a full page detailing Soundmirror's recording session.) The dynamic range is perhaps too impressive, at least for my system, and only at one point during the Eighth Symphony. Midway through the slow movement the clarinets, playing alone, descend to a *ppp* note, followed by a *ppp* note for cellos and basses, before the horns enter with a phrase rising to *ffz*. I found this passage nearly inaudible without setting the volume at a level too high for the rest of the recording. I know this sounds like a complaint from some distant hi-fi era, from those with inferior equipment, but I do note that Honeck does not call for such an extreme contrast during other *ppp* passages in the symphony (e.g., the end of the first section of the slow movement).

Performance: 

Enjoyment: 

Recording Quality: 