

**Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)**

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88 (1889) [38:57]

**Leoš JANÁČEK (1854-1938)**

Symphonic Suite Jenůfa (1896-1902) (version conceptualised by Manfred Honeck, realised by Tomáš Ille) [22:57]

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck

rec. 11-13 October 2014, Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

**REFERENCE RECORDINGS FR-710 SACD [62:04]**

I've not heard any of Manfred Honeck's previous Pittsburgh recordings, though I've read good things about them. However, I was very impressed when I saw him conduct the Czech Philharmonic in Verdi's Requiem earlier this year ([review](#)) so I jumped at the chance to hear this new disc of live recordings.

The notes are by Honeck himself and if you read what he has to say on the Dvořák you'll find that he's effectively gone back to first principles with the score. In a reading that takes nothing for granted he has tried to consider aspects of it "in the sense of the Czech tradition". So as you listen you'll find a lot of detail illuminated to an extent that one rarely experiences – those wonderful, exuberant horn trills in the finale are given special prominence, for example. However, you'll also find that this is quite an interventionist reading and I can imagine that Honeck's often spacious way with the second and fourth movements in particular may divide opinion.

Given Honeck's approach I thought it would be interesting to compare and contrast his reading with two recordings that I greatly admire by conductors with a particular repute in this music: the live 2008 performance by Sir Charles Mackerras ([review](#)) and, from an earlier generation, the 1935 recording by the Czech Philharmonic under the great Václav Talich ([review](#)). Incidentally, Honeck himself has strong links with the Czech Philharmonic: he was their principal guest conductor between 2008 and 2011 and starting with the 2013/14 season he has been reappointed to the post for a second term though I don't know how much Czech music he has conducted with them.

Honeck opens the first movement with a warm, supple rendition of the opening theme. Shortly thereafter comes a lovely little flute solo which Honeck likens to birdsong. Consequently he allows plenty of freedom at this point where Talich and Mackerras maintain their pulse. I find the Honeck effect charming but can imagine that some might feel it is a bit mannered. As the movement unfolds I was conscious of significant attention to detail in Honeck's performance but I don't feel this is pedantic: there's still a sense of the big picture. He gets high marks from me for dividing his violins. When the opening theme returns (4:02) Honeck lavishes care on the music both in terms of dynamics and rubato – and note the delicious little portamento by the first violins immediately before the theme: Talich also does the portamento, though more moderately. As the theme is played it sounds much more moulded by Honeck than by either of the other two conductors, both of whom are more direct in their expression. I enjoyed Honeck's account of this

movement which ends with an exciting, fast coda.

The second movement may prove more controversial. Honeck speculates whether **Dvořák** might have had in mind the Napoleonic battle of Austerlitz, a town nearby. Is that too fanciful? Perhaps it is but whatever reflections have prompted Honeck's conception of the movement it is one of the most dramatic that I can recall hearing, one that is founded on extremely strong dynamic contrasts – some of the quiet music is very quiet indeed. The pauses and rests that the composer has written into the score are used to maximum effect. The performance is also conceived on a spacious scale: Honeck takes 11:44 whereas both Mackerras and Talich need less than 10:30 yet I don't feel that either of them short-changes the listener in matters of expression. A snag with Honeck's approach is that making the most of the silences at a slow pulse runs the risk of making the music seem if not fragmented then episodic and I'm not sure that this danger is entirely avoided.

In the third movement Honeck is very successful in putting over an air of gentle melancholy without diminishing the fundamental attractiveness of the music. In the passage between 2:58 and 3:21 the violins' use of portamento enhances the melancholy aspect in an enchanting way – Talich and Mackerras deploy some portamento here but the effect is slightly more marked in Pittsburgh. I love the way that at 3:42 Honeck holds back the rising violin phrase that leads back to the main theme; Talich does something similar but not to the same degree. Mackerras is affectionate yet more direct in this movement and I find his performance a sheer delight. I greatly enjoyed the Honeck performance as well.

I suspect Honeck's approach to the finale - a movement described by the late Michael Steinberg as 'footloose variations' - will court more controversy. He's very deliberate indeed in the way he plays the opening theme. This means that when the first tutti arrives – with those horn trills here sounding absolutely splendid – Honeck increases the tempo significantly. Actually, the way the music really bursts into life in his hands is quite exciting though I'm not sure it's authentic. By contrast Talich is able to maintain a constant speed at this point while Mackerras only speeds up slightly. It may give you a feel for Honeck's spaciousness if I say that he gets to that first tutti at 2:30 whereas Talich and Mackerras both get there in around two minutes; that's quite a difference in such a short passage. In the pages that follow Honeck brings out a significant amount of detail. At 5:34 the theme returns on the strings accompanied by a stealthy bassoon and here and in the whole passage up to 9:42 Honeck, at a measured pace, makes the music sound more tender and intimate than I can ever recall hearing before. Talich doesn't try anything similar, moulding the music much less obviously, and playing the music warmly but directly. Mackerras is absolutely winning in his approach to these pages: he keeps the tempo flowing but he gets the Philharmonia strings to caress the music. Honeck ends the symphony in an exciting blaze with an exciting dash to the finishing line.

I've described the performance in some detail because it's far from a conventional interpretation and though the symphony is a much-played staple of the repertoire there's nothing remotely routine about Honeck's way with it – not that Talich or Mackerras in their more traditional performances give the listener anything routine either. I can imagine that some listeners may find this performance over-interpreted or contrived. I very much respect Honeck's thoughtful and often perceptive approach and I loved the freshness of the performance. I love this symphony –

it's my favourite **Dvořák** symphony - and I greatly enjoyed this performance.

The companion piece on this disc is a Symphonic Suite from **Janáček's opera** *Jenůfa*. Here I must immediately put up my hand and admit that I'm in some difficulty in appraising this because, though I'm familiar with this composer's orchestral music, I'm much less well versed in his operas. I'm not helped very much, either, by the limitations of the documentation. I think it's a fair bet that most people buying this disc will know the symphony but many may share my unfamiliarity with **Janáček's operas**. Manfred Honeck's note, which is significantly shorter than his note about the symphony, tells us that he felt it was "particularly important to present the most significant moments of the opera story in this suite." To be fair, he then goes on to say: "This includes the emotions of *Jenůfa*, the sadness of losing a child, drama and storminess (weather), and also the conciliatory ending." Apart from also telling us that three dances from the opera have been included that's all the guidance we are given. I don't think that's enough: listeners deserve more to help them navigate their way through what they're hearing. An opportunity has been wasted here. It seems that the selection of music from the opera has been made by Honeck and then, in his words, "arranged by" the Czech composer, Tomáš Ilie. More than that I can't tell you, I'm afraid.

What I *can* tell you is that the music is colourful, varied and superbly played. The cause of this suite is helped immeasurably not just by the superb playing of the Pittsburgh orchestra but also by the thrilling recorded sound. There's an excellent example of both in the passage between 17:40 and 18:32 where first the incisive percussion and then the biting, potent brass are vividly reported in a most exciting way.

All of which leads me on nicely to say firstly that throughout both items on the programme the orchestral playing is magnificent. The soft playing, especially in the symphony, is quite marvellous while loud passages find the players delivering powerful, exciting sound without ever forcing the tone. Manfred Honeck clearly has a very fine and responsive orchestra at his disposal and he's evidently trained them exactly and well. The recordings are made by Soundmirror of Boston and they have produced some very fine sound here. The recording is bright – though not excessively so – there's a splendid dynamic range and the balance is excellent. You can hear an abundance of detail though there's no suggestion of artificial spotlighting. This is a recording which I think we'll have to audition in the MusicWeb International Listening Room. The recordings were made during concerts but the audience is completely unobtrusive and there's no applause after either work.

I'm glad to have experienced a Manfred Honeck recording at last and I'm even more glad that it's lived up to the expectations raised by seeing him live in Prague. In the booklet we are told that several more Honeck/Pittsburgh recordings are 'in the can' and that the intention is to issue a couple each year. I look forward to more examples of this fine partnership at work.

[John Quinn](#)

Previous review: [Michael Cookson](#)