

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 SACD FR-710 [62:04]

This excellent disc is the second in the 'Pittsburgh Live!' series. Earlier this year I [reviewed](#) the first in the series (Strauss tone poems) and was delighted by the elevated quality of performance and sound.

The main event here is Dvořák's Symphony No. 8, a work written quickly in 1889 at his country home Vysoká, Příbrami in Bohemia. Dvořák was having a dispute with his usual publisher Simrock so he had the work published by the London firm Novello who wanted to give the G major Symphony the name 'English' Symphony. Compared to the dramatic, rather serious, tone of the Seventh Symphony the Eighth can be regarded as the most Czech in conception, style and character. Its melodies are influenced by impressions of the natural world and flowed easily to Dvořák's pen. In the accompanying notes written by Manfred Honeck the four movement Symphony is described as "a special jewel" in the repertoire. Honeck explains how he has altered certain details of the score in keeping with Czech tradition. For example he has the march in the opening movement played in the manner of a *dumka*, encourages the discerning use of portamenti and liberal use of rubato, makes a number of tempo changes and in the fourth movement ensures the polka is played more in the Slavic style. Some may consider Honeck's intervention as unnecessary interference but to my ears it all seems to work wonderfully well. With playing of such captivating expression in the opening *Allegro con brio* the PSO conveys a colourful, fresh outdoor effect. There is an especially exuberant feel to the Slavic march section and the movement ends with a tremendous draught of sound. In the manner of a miniature tone poem the delightful flowing rhythms of the *Adagio* strongly evoke a river journey, maybe on the Vltava, complete with changing scenery and weather. Expressively upbeat on the surface the *Allegretto grazioso* has the delightful character of a Czech waltz yet underneath Honeck convincingly uncovers a seam of yearning sadness. In the Finale, marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, the wonderfully rousing trumpet fanfare certainly gains the attention and the gorgeous main theme first introduced on the cellos at 0:34 has never sounded better. The set of variations sound exquisite concluding with a noisy and vigorous played coda. Throughout the score there's a strong Czech spirit ensuring romantic warmth and dramatic thrust.

Dvořák's later symphonies have maintained an unyielding popularity in the concert hall as well as on record. Consequently there is plenty of choice. Since its release I have been completely satisfied with the fresh and vital 1986 account of the Eighth Symphony from the Cleveland Orchestra under Christoph von Dohnányi on Decca. Another personal favourite is part of the beautifully played set of Dvořák complete symphonies from the Berliner Philharmoniker under Rafael Kubelik. This was recorded in 1966-73 on Deutsche Grammophon. For Reference Recordings the present live recording is exceptional and can join the most illustrious entries in the catalogue.

Continuing the Czech theme Honeck has coupled the symphony with his own original version of the symphonic suite from Janáček's opera *Jenůfa*. It was in fact Czech composer Tomáš Ille who did the arranging from Honeck's conceptualisation of the most important moments of *Jenůfa*.

This *Jenůfa* Suite is mainly music of joy and optimism marked by starkly contrasting sections of terrible sadness depicting Jenůfa's disfiguration and the death of her child. A remarkable degree of tension is developed in the work's thrilling conclusion. In June 2014 Honeck and the PSO gave the world premiere of the Symphonic Rhapsody from Richard Strauss's opera *Elektra* arranged by the same partnership of Honeck and Ille. I hope this will be released on disc soon.

This multi-channel hybrid SACD produced by the Soundmirror team of Boston for Reference Recordings was recorded live in October 2014 at three concerts in the splendid acoustic of the Heinz Hall, Pittsburgh. The sound quality on my standard player comes across as vividly clear, well balanced with a warm, natural presence. I can detect virtually no extraneous noise and the audience applause has been taken out.

Stunningly played and recorded this winning release deserves significant praise.

Michael Cookson