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## SACD REVIEW

### Anton Bruckner

#### *Symphony #4 in E Flat Major "Romantic" (Ed. Nowak)*

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra / Manfred Honeck  
Reference Recordings *fresh!* FR-713SACD Hybrid  
Multichannel 66:07



I have been anticipating this release since the beginning of Pittsburgh's partnership with Reference Recordings. The orchestra is – and always has been – a veritable Mahler powerhouse, and so the prospect of Bruckner was simply tantalizing. This team delivered the goods with a phenomenal Strauss program and followed that with a highly individual Czech disc. This marvelous Bruckner 4<sup>th</sup> is just as personal, and features an ensemble that continues to rival any in Europe.

The opening instantly establishes this as Honeck's own performance. Instead of the usual rapid and frantic sounding strings (a completely legitimate interpretative choice) at the beginning, the conductor has his players clearly define their lines, adding genuine tension and mystery. The

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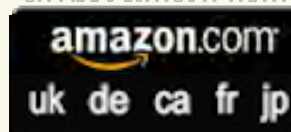
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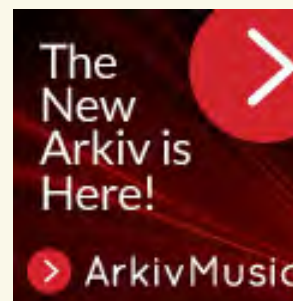
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first climax is similarly unique. In refusing to allow the ensemble to blare all-out, the orchestra is held back at first, allowing the music to steadily but purposefully build throughout the movement. The Pittsburgh brass and winds sound simply divine. There are moments where the brass chorales take on an organ-like glow that wholly suits the composer. It's quite magical. At the same time, they aren't afraid to let go, and are equaled by few others today in terms of power and majesty. About 10 minutes in, the strings and brass work so thrillingly together that it effectively captures everything right about this disc. While neither very fast nor very slow, Honeck's ability to raise the temperature continuously makes the music move in a way that it absolutely requires. Few conductors make Bruckner sound fun, but Honeck manages.

A gorgeously phrased but never heavy *Andante* follows. The conductor really brings out the folk-inspired tunes (exceptional bass lines, these) and his players respond with total conviction. At about the same speed on EMI, Herbert von Karajan finds markedly less dynamic contrast in Berlin, while Jochum (also in Berlin, but on Deutsche Grammophon) comes much closer to the mark. Neither disc is nearly as well-recorded as this Reference Recordings album, especially in the aforementioned bass. The superior recording quality allows us to hear the exceptionally fine blend of the low strings in Pittsburgh. There is also such an appreciable flexibility of pulse here; you really can admire Honeck's dedication to bringing out the Bohemian elements of this massive score.

At exactly Jochum's tempo, Honeck's newer version of the *Scherzo* has exactly the same qualities of lightness and virtuosity, in much better sound. The massed brass will simply leave you astonished; they refuse to rush, allowing maximum clarity and impact. Credit the winds and strings as well, they also show the same sense of purpose and musicality. I've never heard the music played with this combination of excitement and sonic splendor. The end is magnificent. The same could be said of the entire finale, which proves uncompromisingly swift and intense. Some moments are simply harrowing in their relentless drive and sonorities effortlessly built from the ground up. The closing pages are just about perfect. This is truly a Bruckner performance for any collection, one which wipes away the notion that the composer's music has to be big and boring. Rather, this is a performance that combines Barenboim's excitement with Jochum's deep understanding of the idiom (Barenboim's Chicago recording is admittedly a little short on subtlety). Captured in absolutely stunning sound (did I mention that?), this is a completely convincing reading from first note to last.

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