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## Honeck and Pittsburgh Do Right By Bruckner's Fourth

Review by: David Hurwitz



*Artistic Quality: 10*  
*Sound Quality: 9*

Everyone plays Bruckner these days. Everyone records Bruckner these days. Ninety-nine percent of those recordings, never mind the live performances, are dreck. They exist for a few reasons. First, the International Bruckner Society in Vienna churns out endless "critical editions" of the various symphonies, documenting every minor adjustment or correction (that may or may not have been sanctioned by the composer) as an independent version of the work in question. "Oh, look! On Wednesday at 3 o'clock in the afternoon Bruckner's cleaning lady suggested adding a trill to the second bassoon part in

measure 137 in the slow movement of the Second Symphony. Let's print a new score!" This gives conductors who otherwise have no business touching the music an opportunity to draw attention to themselves and differentiate "their" performance, not by any particular interpretive insight or intelligence, but simply on account of the text that they select.

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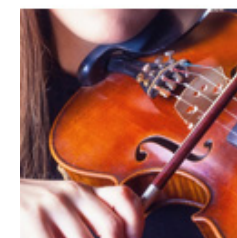
by David Hurwitz

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Second, the music itself supports performances by conductors—the majority today—who have little feeling for the tonally-based, goal-directed sonata style that informs the great classics of the German symphonic tradition. Most Bruckner symphonies, glorious though they may be, are stop-and-go affairs that can work quite well when played extremely slowly, with the emphasis placed on their formal discontinuities. This puts them in close proximity to the works of many contemporary composers, tonal or not, who operate in similar terms of contrasting sound blocks that lay side by side and merely alternate, rather than developing and growing organically through various climaxes to an ultimate goal. In other words, Bruckner offers the opportunity to work within the German tradition—or some aspects of it—for conductors who have little feeling for that tradition in most other respects. It's a legitimate if limited approach to the music, and it often results in performances that share a generic sameness. Far more interesting are those conductors who understand the German tradition and the sonata style and present Bruckner accordingly, in context, if you will. Jochum was one such, although there were many back in the day. Honeck is another.

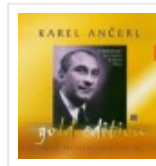
For this magnificent performance of the Fourth Symphony, he uses the “standard” Nowak edition of 1878/80, but he makes it his own. This is what conductors are supposed to do, of course, but so few manage it, especially in Bruckner. The most immediately remarkable aspect of the performance is its huge dynamic range, especially from the brass section. Pittsburgh has possibly the best horn section in the world today, not just in its ringing fortissimos, but in its ability to play softly. The strings, too, manage triple-pianos without any loss of body, an ability due in part to a healthy, idiomatic, and authentic application of vibrato to the passages that demand it. Honeck's conducting treats tempo and dynamics flexibly, naturally, and seamlessly. There are too many examples to mention, but consider the extra lift he gives the cheerful second subject of the first movement; or the warm rush of string tone when he slows down in the central development section of the otherwise brilliantly exciting scherzo, where Bruckner says “calmer”; or the delicious accompanying grace notes in the violas that Honeck brings out in the finale's second theme (first heard five bars after figure C).

These are subtleties of the moment, but the interpretation also binds the music together in a way that shows that Bruckner, for all those broken-off climaxes and pauses, really did have a long-range vision of where he wanted the music to go. To take just one example: the extremely soft, tenuto treatment of the opening horn motive makes the closing bars of



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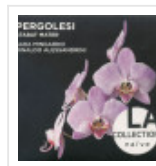
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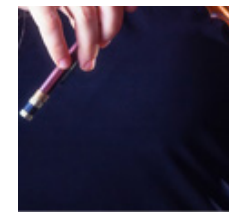
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the first movement all the more fulfilling, when the players really let rip with the same music. We hear the moment as the culmination of the potential latent in the very first bars. Honeck also isn't afraid to modify the text now and then: some extra bits for the timpani, a few adjustments in the brass, and some additional terracing of Bruckner's already "terraced" dynamics, but as the above suggests, he is just as sensitive to the letter of the score. In other words, his ideas operate within the idiom. There are no mustaches painted on this particular Mona Lisa. It's just a stylish, splendidly played interpretation of a kind all too rare today.

Reference Recordings is known for its resplendent sonics, but recording live is always tricky. Here, the result isn't quite as fabulous as in previous releases, being perhaps a touch low-level, but it's still pretty awesome. Just turn up the volume for the best effect. In the cluttered mess that is the world of classical recordings today, Honeck and Pittsburgh stand virtually alone as a partnership truly worthy of your time and attention.

Recording Details:

Reference Recording: Jochum (DG)

BRUCKNER, ANTON:

Symphony No. 4 "Romantic"

[Honeck, Manfred](#) (conductor)

[Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra](#)

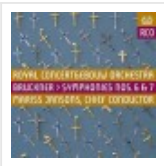
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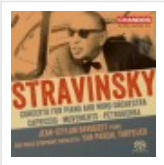
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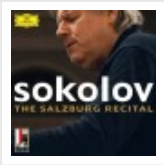
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