

Feb 23 2015

Performance: ★★★★★ Sonics: **Multi-ch** ★★★★★

There are already countless recordings available of Bruckner's most popular symphony, the 4th, to suit the taste of even the most dedicated Brucknerite. All the great Bruckner interpreters of the past and present have committed this work to disc, often on more than one occasion – Böhm, Jochum, Karajan, Haitink. Blomstedt and Barenboim to name just a few – so any newcomer needs to possess special qualities to tempt collectors in what is a very crowded field. This exceptional new account of the Symphony from Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra has these in abundance.

Judged by the standard of his earlier releases on Reference Recordings of Strauss Tone Poems [Strauss: Don Juan, Tod und Verklärung, Till Eulenspiegel - Honeck](#) and a coupling of works by Dvorak and Janacek

[Dvorak: Symphony No. 8, Janacek: Jenufa \(suite\) - Honeck](#), as well as his work for other labels, Manfred Honeck has shown himself to be a searching interpreter of everything he conducts, in addition to being an outstandingly cultured musician and fine orchestral trainer.

Like Bruckner, Manfred Honeck is Austrian and also a man of deep religious faith, so it is perhaps not surprising that he shows great empathy with this composer's oeuvre.

Honeck's starting point for his very personal interpretation of the music on this SACD is the scenario that Bruckner devised some time after he had completed the work to justify the title 'Romantic' that he appended to it. Honeck convincingly relates the musical ideas to the literary ones outlined in the composer's programme – something that in some respects moves the symphony closer to becoming a four-movement tone-poem.

In his exceptionally informative booklet notes Honeck writes "I remain personally convinced that Bruckner's musical phrases and thoughts require their own flexible tempi and expressions, particularly when referring to nature and folklore. It is for this reason that the rigorous reading of Bruckner as a master of the organ and counterpoint might not always be thoroughly sound."

This statement gives an indication of both the freedom of tempi and dynamics that Honeck employs throughout his performance, one for which he has chosen to use the familiar Leopold Nowak (1878/80) edition. But the way one is immediately gripped by the opening bars of Honeck's performance it is clear that it promises to be something quite special.

The romantic atmosphere is immediately established by the ethereal lightness and shimmer of the string tremolos that open the first movement, over which the beautifully played horn solo from William Caballero steals in seemingly from afar. The sheer beauty of the orchestral playing can be appreciated at any point in the Symphony's 66' span, but as an example try the start of the recapitulation (11'54") where flute and horn intertwine over soft strings and almost tactile timpani – quite magical.

The solemn slow movement is notable for the glowing richness of the Pittsburgh strings especially the

delicacy of the eloquently nuanced violas, while Honeck's tempi, are forward moving and purposeful. As one might expect Bruckner's evocation of the hunt in the Scherzo is given special vividness and excitement by Honeck and his orchestra's magnificent brass section. The central Trio of this movement is very relaxed, but the conductor most definitely achieves the 'Gemutlichkeit' he seeks to convey.

Honeck's powerfully driving account of the Finale – a movement of great contrasts and difficult to bring off successfully – is free yet it does not lack cohesion. The pulse is firm though flexible, and he skilfully negotiates the many tempo changes with great aplomb. The gradual build up of tension from the start of the coda to the movement's triumphant ending with its effulgent brass is spine tingling, leaving one with a feeling of huge admiration for all the musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony.

The two earlier Reference Recordings issues mentioned above have demonstrated what the Soundmirror engineers can achieve in the Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, but here they have excelled themselves and produced a recording that is quite exceptional in its dynamic range, clarity and spaciousness. The liner notes include full technical details of how the superlative 5.1 multi-channel sound was achieved from the live performances (6-8 December, 2013).

Overall Honeck's interpretation could be best described as supple and alive rather than coldly marmoreal, and though its undeniable individuality will not appeal to all listeners this distinctive, some might say revelatory, account of Bruckner's 4th Symphony should not be missed.