

# PSO Beethoven CD provides personality, weight to symphonies

By [Mark Kanny](#)

Saturday, Nov. 14, 2015, 5:32 p.m.

The new recording of Beethoven's Symphonies Nos. 5 and 7 by Manfred Honeck and the [Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra](#) is exceptionally compelling, featuring true individuality, committed playing and demonstration-quality sound.

The performances were recorded at December 2014 concerts at [Heinz Hall](#). Honeck's deeply considered interpretations sometimes change over time. Beethoven's Seventh was the first of Beethoven's nine symphonies that he conducted here — stunning performances in May 2009 near the end of his first season as music director.

The famous Fifth Symphony begins with a motif that Beethoven said represented fate knocking at the door, according to one of his closest associates. Honeck presents it much slower than nearly all the rest of the movement, completely different from how he handled it in 2010. It also has the force of a genuine fortissimo. Then the music takes off, scurrying with nervous tension, but with sensitive lyricism, too.

Honeck respects Beethoven's metronome markings and makes them work in both symphonies. But he is not slavish about it. In 2014, he was notably flexible with tempo within movements, nearly always quite subtly, for the sake of characterization. One of the most notable examples of impetuosity occurs at the start of the Trio of the third movement, when the cellos and basses play an accelerando and crescendo at the end of the first few measures.

The second movement is beautifully songful at the quick tempo, while an unusually “sostenuto” approach to the martial music keeps it from sounding too punchy. Unexpected sostenuto in the triumphant finale also helps Honeck emphasize melodies that carry the music forward. The Presto at the end is faster than the metronome marking. It is a performance bursting with “exultant jubilation,” according to Barry Cooper in his introduction to the Barenreiter critical edition score.

The recording of Beethoven's Seventh retains the striking force of Honeck's 2009 performances, including an excellent tempo relationship between the Presto Scherzo and the finale, with the Scherzo faster.

The CD includes fascinating program notes by Honeck, which, among many details, discusses some of his changes to the score, including having the violins play pizzicato at the end of the second movement of the Seventh and adding a rhythmic hemiola — asyncoption — he infers in the third movement of the Fifth.

The conductors' notes also refer to a study dividing approaches to Beethoven into three eras: romantic; modern and objective starting in 1950; and the contemporary historically informed approach.

Honeck takes a post-historicist's stance with this new recording. He's absorbed the latest scholarship but interprets the music with more dimension, personality and weight.

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