

Classical CD Choice November 16, 2015

BEETHOVEN: SYMPHONIES 5 & 7, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Manfred Honeck/Reference Recordings FR-718 SACD The refreshingly vivid interpretations of works by Richard Strauss, Dvorak, Janacek and Bruckner that have appeared over the last few years on the Reference Recordings 'Fresh' label from Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra have convincingly demonstrated the ability of this partnership to deliver new and often remarkable insights into some of the most popular and frequently recorded orchestral works in the classical repertoire. For any conductor committing two of the most famous and most recorded symphonies to disc is a courageous venture that should not be undertaken lightly, but Honeck's riveting if occasionally controversial accounts of Beethoven's 5th and 7th Symphonies fully justify this decision. In a wonderfully written twelve page essay entitled 'Looking behind the Notes' in the accompanying booklet with this disc Honeck clearly and cogently explains in detail the reasons and justifications for the various interpretive decisions he has made in these performances. It is up to each listener to decide for themselves whether they work, but even skeptical listeners will surely learn something from these illuminating and brilliantly executed interpretations in which any sense of routine is entirely banished. Strikingly, at the opening of the 5th Symphony, Honeck weightily stresses the two statements of the famous 'Fate knocking at the door' four-note motive before the violins and violas adopt the fast and urgent tempo that characterizes the rest of his performance of this movement. The following 'Andante con moto' flows purposefully, yet Honeck often relaxes the tempo to allow some felicitous woodwind passages to be appreciated to the full, but the final bars, though breathtakingly beautiful, will, for some, seem a little too fussily phrased or romanticized. The Symphony's last two movements are executed supremely well. The Scherzo has a heroic and flamboyant drive with the Trio section crisply articulated by the superb Pittsburgh strings, while the build-up into the blazing and defiant Finale is all one could wish for. Beethoven's striking use of the piccolo is just one the many details that emerge in Honeck's gripping interpretation of this movement. The 7th Symphony (repeats observed as in the 5th) is equally impressive with an opening movement of great vivacity and boundless energy – the Pittsburgh horns especially thrilling here. The second movement 'Allegretto' begins with some exquisitely soft dynamics from the burnished strings and, following the example of Kleiber, – both père and fils – in their respective recordings of this symphony, the closing bars are played pizzicato not arco. The 'Scherzo – Presto' dances with a nimble lightness that contrasts well with the stately central Trio while Honeck's invigorating account of the Finale, though perhaps a little too fast at the start, maintains its unrelenting energy right to the exhilarating final chord. The playing of every section of the Pittsburgh Symphony is first rate in both works. Honeck uses what to some will be an unfashionably large orchestra but, thanks to the precision and unanimity of his splendidly focused players, the antiphonal seating of the violins, the use of timpani with hard sticks and brisk tempi throughout, he gains not only most of the best elements of period performance style but also the extra magisterial grandeur that Beethoven's masterpieces deliver when larger forces are employed. The Soundmirror, Boston team of Dirk Sobotka, Mark Donahue and John Newton have engineered an exceptionally clean and detailed 5.1 stereo and multi-channel 64ff DSD recording, made live in the Heinz Hall, Pittsburgh (5-7 December 2014), that puts the seal on Manfred Honeck's vital and intelligent readings of these two inexhaustible masterpieces.

--Graham Williams