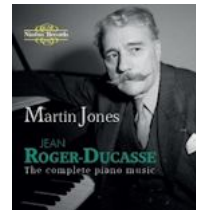
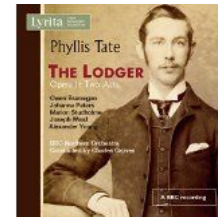




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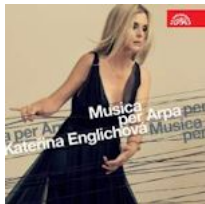


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## REVIEW RECORDING OF THE MONTH

**Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**  
[Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 \(1807\) \[31.21\]](#)  
[Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 \(1812\) \[39.55\]](#)  
Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck  
rec. live, 5-7 December 2014, Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, PA, USA  
**REFERENCE RECORDINGS FR-718 SACD [71.27]**

It's uncommon for a review to start with a discussion of the booklet notes, but the essay which accompanies this CD is a key to understanding just what a great album it is. Over the course of 12 pages, conductor Manfred Honeck sets a new standard for excellence in CD booklets. He walks us through these two beloved Beethoven symphonies, moment by moment, pointing out details we may have missed - and indeed, over years of listening, I'd missed quite a few. His notes are personal, explaining what he feels is important about each work, outlining his interpretive decisions, and relating his own history with the music.

There are stories about performing these symphonies, as Honeck did, under the baton of Carlos Kleiber. There are numerous examples of Honeck's interpretive decisions, with bar numbers and down-to-the-second identifications of where on the track you can find them. For example, in bar 473, or 6:36, in the first movement of the Fifth, Honeck unearths and has the orchestra emphasize a Fate-motif played by the first French horn. I have never heard this on any other recording.

Not all of Honeck's decisions are conventional or commonly-accepted. Many times, he explains deviations from the written score. For example, he stretches out the first four notes of the Fifth, well under tempo, to really emphasize that Fate business. This makes me a little queasy, but it is executed better here than on similar recordings from the 1940s-50s. Honeck has the strings finish the Seventh Symphony's funeral allegretto entirely pizzicato but he also explains these decisions, at length, in the booklet, so that, agree or not, you at least know what he was thinking.

The cumulative effect is like watching a beloved movie with the DVD commentary track. The director himself points out all sorts of tricks and techniques used to make the film better. If you've heard Roger Ebert break down, shot-by-shot, just what makes *Citizen Kane* a revolution in filmmaking, you know this feeling. Manfred Honeck is a guide of similar authority. Not content to summarize the history of the Beethoven symphonies and recycle clichés about what they "mean," Honeck leads us inside the music and focuses our ears. The second time I listened to this CD, I followed along booklet in hand, the way a musician might follow along with the sheet music. Just to be clear, in the two weeks since receiving this CD, I have listened to it many, many times.

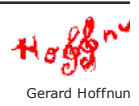
Now we can move on to the performances. They are, frankly, as good as any I've ever heard. Broadly speaking, they are similar to Karajan's 1962 cycle, in that they combine high energy and bold power with a truly massive, epic orchestral sound. Honeck only makes a handful of concessions to the period-performance movement (which he details in the booklet), but many of his goals are the same. Total transparency, for example, informs his desire to make audible every single iteration of the Fifth's famous motif. The timpani may not be thwacked by old-fashioned hard sticks, but they cut through the texture with a thrill nonetheless. If you associate the period-practice movement with greater raw excitement and energy, well, the finales of these two symphonies have almost never been more thrillingly played.

Making matters better: the Pittsburgh Symphony is a spectacular orchestra. Under Honeck, they have risen from one of the best orchestras in America to, frankly, one of the best in the world. You get the feeling that this conductor/orchestra tandem has raised every performer, Honeck included, to a higher

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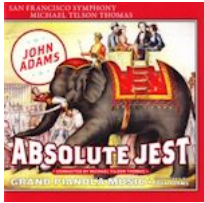


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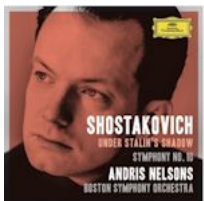
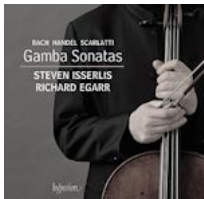




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Enough with these generalities. Let's talk specifics. Honeck has the two violin sections sit opposite each other, and then capitalizes on the arrangement by deliberately playing up every moment when the violins echo or converse with each other. This gives an extra rapid-fire thrill to a passage (7:25-37) in the Seventh Symphony's finale. The orchestra is presented at the size of the Seventh Symphony's premiere band, which is to say humongous — seven double basses. The sound is not as dark-hued as the Leipzig Gewandhaus under Riccardo Chailly, or the Staatskapelle Berlin under Barenboim, but the Pittsburgh strings do still sound uncannily Germanic, or Viennese. I doubt any blindfolded listener could guess this orchestra is American.

A special paragraph for the French horns. I've said before what an extraordinary group the Pittsburgh French horns are, and indeed so has nearly every critic who's heard them: Michael Cookson on their Bruckner 4 CD: "I doubt the heavily engaged trumpets and horns have ever sounded better." Dan Morgan on that same Bruckner: "While I miss Böhm's unique Viennese horns the PSO's — glowing, gorgeous — are as noble and commanding as one could wish." This is especially true here, where Honeck capitalizes on the orchestra's strength and emphasizes horn lines which have long been buried in the background. Try the first 30 seconds of the Seventh's finale on for size: yet another example of details I had never heard until this disc.

The recorded sound, by engineers from Soundmirror, is exemplary. It is close, true, but not in a confining way; it's more like, as in the Reference Recordings slogan, "the best seat in the house." You can feel the thrill rolling off the stage. Soundmirror also contributes to Honeck's goal of total orchestral clarity, though here the score is just shy of perfect. They do capture a few of the conductor's grunts and sighs. I don't have an SACD player but can only imagine the effect. Reference Recordings and BIS are still the two leaders in how to record an orchestra, and Reference in particular seems to have finally mastered the art of recording a live concert without it sounding a little drab.

There are hundreds of recordings of these symphonies. I own around 25-30. Are these "the best"? Well, that's a fool's errand. There is no such thing. However very few recordings have ever been better played, or conducted or engineered. You might prefer the Fifth-Seventh coupling by Honeck's inspiration, Carlos Kleiber. That's an extraordinary disc. For an American recording, you might prefer George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra but this disc is in the conversation with such illustrious names. Considering some high profile recordings from the last 20 years, this is far more impassioned than the robotically played Vänskä/Minnesota SACD; it's in better sound than Mackerras on Hyperion; it exceeds Rattle in every way; it is marginally more characterful than Haitink/LSO; it has a better orchestra than Norrington, Skrowaczewski, Krivine, Tremblay or Kuhn. Honeck's decisions are wiser and more mature than Pletnev's and there is more energy and vibrancy than Thielemann/Dresden. I like many of those recordings, and even love several — Mackerras, Skrowaczewski, Haitink — but I like this one more.

In other words, the Pittsburgh/Honeck Beethoven album reaches the shortlist of this century's great Beethoven symphony recordings. Also on my list are recordings by the Leipzig Gewandhaus with Riccardo Chailly, the Berlin Philharmonic with Claudio Abbado, and Anima Eterna with Jos van Immerseel. This disc might have the best sound quality of all and it certainly has revolutionary booklet notes. You don't often find yourself learning new things, and hearing new angles, in music as well-worn as Beethoven's Fifth. That is what makes this such a special experience.

Brian Reinhart



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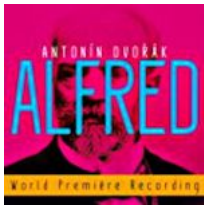
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