

Honeck And Pittsburgh's Beethoven For The Ages

Review by: David Hurwitz

Artistic Quality: 10

Sound Quality: 10

No matter how many billion recordings of this music we already have, a great performance offers its own justification, these are very great performances. In his thoughtful booklet notes, conductor Manfred Honeck reveals his understanding not just of Beethoven, but more importantly for our purposes, his knowledge of the Beethoven discography. It's not easy to offer interpretations of this music that sound new without turning capricious—that both respect the music and personalize it. Honeck and the orchestra manage to pull it off consistently, with bravura, finesse, and an intelligence that makes these versions a true celebration of Beethoven's genius.

The first element that lends this disc such distinction is the quality of the orchestra itself. Let's be honest: there simply is no finer ensemble in the world today, even if it may sound controversial to say so. From top to bottom the Pittsburgh players reveal themselves as equal or superior to anyone out there; and when led by a charismatic conductor like Honeck, they have few if any peers. Whether we're talking about the density and rhythmic snap of the strings in the Fifth's first movement, the beautiful tone of the oboes in the Seventh, the rock-solid timpani, or the incomparably noble French horns romping through the outer movements of both works, this is just sensational at every turn.

Atop this foundation, Honeck builds interpretations that find countless ear-catching details within the context of a dramatic, intensely propulsive view of each symphony. Witness, for example, the Fifth's finale, where Honeck gives a subtle dynamic push to the violins upward rushing scales (sound clip), or the closing pages of the coda, taken at a true presto. And yet it's not all sound and fury. In the Seventh's Allegretto, Honeck achieves an absolutely perfect balance in the string choir between subject and countersubject, with rhythm of the

basses touched in so clearly that you might wonder how it is that we've never heard it done quite this way before (sound clip).

Everything that Honeck does, in fact, has its basis in the score, and at every point serves to support and underline Beethoven's intentions in the most natural and idiomatic way. You get the thrill of a live performance, the perfection of the best studio work, and sonics that capture it all with exemplary warmth and fidelity. So sit back, crank up the volume, and get ready for an incredible ride. There's life in the classics after all.

- See more at: <http://www.classicstoday.com/review/honeck-and-pittsburghs-beethoven-for-the-ages/#sthash.oSuseceJ.dpuf>