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## BEETHOVEN Symphonies Nos 5 & 7

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Author: Richard Osborne

Manfred Honeck has been looked on with favour in these columns since the late 1980s, when he directed a fine recording of Max Bruch's Third Symphony (Marco Polo, 10/88; now on Naxos). Nowadays it is recordings with his own Pittsburgh SO that garner golden opinions. These have been of late-Romantic music, though Pittsburgh also has a fine Beethoven tradition. William Steinberg's celebrated recording of the Pastoral Symphony (Capitol, 5/53R) was described by the old Record Guide as 'a performance of great vitality, remarkable for its fidelity to what we know of the 19th-century orchestral style'. They are words which could pretty well sum up these latest recordings of the Fifth and Seventh symphonies, not least because they are under a conductor who is himself deeply versed in that long-established Austro-German tradition of Beethoven interpretation whose wilderness years might finally be coming to an end.

Honeck's approach to Beethoven's music is no less forensic but far more robust than that of the new-age authenticists - more Promethean, you might say. In the Seventh Symphony, he tells us, it is essential to have 'everything played with the biggest possible impetus and pent-up power'. It's what he calls 'taking the music to the edge', which is very much what he does as this astonishing live performance reaches its apotheosis in



BEETHOVEN Symphonies Nos 5 & 7

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the final movement.

Honeck takes a similar view of the Fifth Symphony, whose opening, he says, requires 'grandiose weight, power and vehemence'. Karajan in his last years did this on the orchestra; Honeck does it by playing the four-note motto with rhythmic rigour but at a slower tempo than the rest of the movement. But, then, who is to say what Beethoven would have thought? 'Fate knocking at the door' and all that. Honeck has quite a few other old-fashioned tricks up his sleeve, though none that is quite as obvious as this.

The Pittsburgh playing marries epic power with a revealing translucency of texture, something which the aptly named Soundmirror team catches in sound that provides generous levels of reverberation with crystal-clear detailing. Honeck has a wonderful ear for detail, be it quietly thematic or utterly bizarre, as in the piccolo's crackerjack contributions to the finale of the Fifth, whose final chord nonetheless manages to offer an inch-perfect balance between piccolo and drum. (The timpani detailing is a revelation throughout.) Like Carlos Kleiber before him, Honeck divides the fiddles antiphonally, a sine qua non in the Seventh but a great joy in the Fifth, where this former member of the Vienna Philharmonic's second violin section conjures forth all manner of telling effects, none more beautiful than the exquisitely spun second violin counterpoint seven bars before fig C (3'49") in the slow movement. Not even Carlos Kleiber manages that. Kleiber's readings are more classical than Honeck's: less histrionic, more dramatic. But that's a purist's view. Honeck's performances deserve to be heard.

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