

Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7 (SACD review)

Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Reference Recordings Fresh! FR-718 SACD.



Let me begin with a few assumptions, maybe wrong but probably close to accurate. I'm going to assume that if you are reading this review, you have at least a passing interest in classical music. Let me assume additionally that with a passing interest in recorded classical music, you are probably already familiar with Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, some of the most recognizable classical music ever written. Then let me take it a step further and assume that if you have an interest in recorded classical music and know a little something about the *Fifth Symphony*, you likely already have a recording or two or more of the piece on your shelf (or on your hard drive or wherever). So, my question is: Why do you need another? Are you reading this review out of curiosity? Do you feel there may be something out there new and different and possibly better than what you already have? Or are you a collector of everything Beethoven or everything *Fifth Symphony*?

Whatever the case, this new entry from Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony on Reference Recordings Fresh! should pique the interest of practically all of you. It's certainly new and different. Whether it's better is another story. I'm not usually keen on live recordings, and I found the coupling of the *Seventh Symphony* more to my liking than the *Fifth*. Thus, for me it sort of narrows the disc's appeal. But other listeners may find much to enjoy. Let's continue.

Honeck opens the album with the *Symphony No. 5 in C minor*, Op. 67, which Beethoven premiered in 1808, having worked on it over the course of some four years. (The premiere, incidentally, famously also included the premieres of the *Sixth Symphony*, the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, and the *Choral Fantasy* among other things, the concert lasting over four hours and conducted by Beethoven himself.) Music historians are quick to point out that Beethoven once wrote "I want to seize fate by the throat; it will never bend me completely to its will." Further, in reference to the beginning of the first movement he remarked to a friend, "Thus Fate knocks at the door!"

Now, here's the thing. With so famous a work, there have been numerous interpretations and in the past

hundred years a multitude of recordings of it. However, none of them is definitive since none came from Beethoven's own time. Which one of today's recordings would have most pleased the composer? Which one is the "best"? Well, clearly, there is no "best." There is only the performance that most satisfies the individual listener. And this is where Honeck comes in. He writes in the extensive booklet notes that he, too, faced perplexing questions of interpretation, which is why he came late to recording any of the Beethoven symphonies.

Fair enough. But there's the "however": Honeck writes "At times, it is necessary to support the rhythmic structure (I have asked for some accents and emphasis) and though Beethoven has not specifically indicated this in the score, one can read it in the musical language." Later, Honeck repeats the notion, saying of the scherzo, "...I have highlighted the humor by emphasizing the unexpected accents..., again not overtly notated in the score, but certainly implied in the music."



Manfred Honeck

Honeck's rather liberal interpretation of Beethoven's music remind me of an old Bob and Ray routine in which the quizmaster of a spelling bee asks a contestant to spell a word and then interrupts him before he has a chance to do so, saying, "No, no, you were going to spell it wrong; I could tell." Somehow, Honeck says he knows what Beethoven intended, even though Beethoven never actually indicated it. OK, I suppose that's what interpretation is all about; but it means that Honeck's Beethoven *Fifth* may or may not appeal to everyone's taste, especially with the liberties he takes with certain emphases, intensifying some notes and phrases more than some listeners may like.

Honeck's expressive rubato goes a long way in maintaining our attention, although his phrasing can also seem a tad eccentric at times. I thought the second-movement *Andante con motto* worked best using this emphatic approach, and it never flags. What's more, we hear a good buildup to the finale, although when the finale does come, it doesn't burst forth with as much enthusiasm as I'd hoped.

The result of Honeck's reading of the symphony is at once different yet somewhat heavy and staid, too. The stresses are there for all to hear, yet the overall impression seems to me one of over-calculated fussiness. Now, don't get me wrong. It's a strong, committed performance, full of well-disciplined control, with an especially good response from the orchestra, who also sound committed and well disciplined. It's just that I don't hear all that much that excites me about the reading, and in parts, at least, it seems actually to drag a bit. I don't feel the electricity in it that I feel in a few other, competing recordings.

My final judgment: Honeck's recording of the *Fifth* does not appeal to me as much as the driving, headlong execution of the score by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony (JVC or RCA); the solid, concentrated realization by George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra (Sony); the handsomely traditional rendition by Karl Bohm and the Vienna Philharmonic (DG); or, most persuasive of all, the truly galvanizing version by Carlos Kleiber, also with the Vienna Phil (DG). These are hard acts to follow, no matter how much a competing conductor claims to be adhering to the composer's implied intent.

Beethoven wrote the *Symphony No. 7 in A major*, Op. 92 between 1811 and 1812. Compared to the *Fifth*, the *Seventh* is a sprightlier, more sparkling piece of music, a work that one of its many admirers, composer Richard Wagner called the "apotheosis of the dance" because of its lively rhythms. Here, I enjoyed Honeck's performance more than I liked his *Fifth*. He doesn't appear to be trying to shape the music to his own peculiar needs as much, rather letting it flow more effortlessly, letting it dance more freely, if you will.

My judgment of Honeck's *Seventh*: Go for it. The competition is not as great as in the Fifth (I like Colin Davis's lyrical account on EMI as well as Carlos Kleiber's more stringent view on DG), and Honeck's way with the music appears animated and unforced.

Producer Dirk Sobatka and engineers Mark Donahue and John Newton of Soundmirror, Boston, recorded the music live at Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, PA in December 2014. They made it for hybrid SACD 5.1 surround, SACD 2.0 stereo, and CD 2.0 stereo. I listened to the two-channel SACD layer.

I don't really care for recordings made before a live audience for two reasons: I usually find audience noise and applause distracting, and I usually find the engineers have recorded everything too closely in order to minimize audience noise. In the former case, the engineers have done a great job in almost eliminating audience noise completely, including applause. In the latter case, the recording still sounds quite close up, losing a little something in orchestral bloom and room ambience. Otherwise, it's quite a good recording, with wide dynamics, strong impact, good clarity, fine definition, and smooth overall response. I doubt that anyone but the pickiest audiophile would find the sound displeasing.