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Reference Recordings releases its fifth Pittsburgh Symphony concert recording

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Conductor Manfred Honeck on the cover of the recording being discussed
from Amazon.com

This coming Friday will see the release if the fifth CD in the *Pittsburgh Live!* Series produced by Reference Recordings. Like many other classical music ensembles, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra has been making recordings of concert performances and releasing a series of compact discs based on that source material. The **new release** is based on a program performed on April 17–19, 2015 at concerts in the Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The major work on that program was Pyotr Tchaikovsky's Opus 74 (sixth) symphony in B minor, often known as the "Pathétique." The CD also includes the world premiere of "Rusalka Fantasy," an orchestral review of themes from Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, prepared jointly by Music Director Manfred Honeck and Tomáš Ille. Both pieces are conducted by Honeck.

Thanks to the massive output of the recording industry, performing a familiar piece of music can be a risky undertaking. It would be safe to say that concert audiences consist heavily of people going to listen to music they already know, but that group actually falls into two categories. The first consists of those who expect to listen to a "faithful reproduction" of their favorite recording. The second is just as informed by experiences of listening to recordings in the past, but they are the ones expecting something *different* from any recording previously encountered.

I am in that second category, but I am pretty sure it is a minority group. In my case I just do not want to be lazy. If a new experience is little more than a faithful reproduction of one about which I have written, then I may as well follow suit and reproduce what I wrote in the past. While that makes the work easier, it also takes all the fun out of writing. I also feel that, as a matter of principle, it defeats the very *raison d'être* of making music in the first place.

Ever since the fifteenth century, those who wrote about music have been turning to ancient documents about oratory, both Greek (Aristotle) and Roman (Cicero). There has been an underlying premise that the very act of music is, in some way that is not merely metaphorical, *discursive*. One listens to both composers and performers with the expectation that they have "something to say;" and the hope is that one will encounter something one does not already know. This is not a matter of the sort of "propositional" knowledge encountered in the syllogisms of Aristotle and centuries of subsequent logicians. Rather, it is a knowledge that is "about" the more time-dependent matter of (with apologies to Martin Heidegger) *being in the world*. Making music is an *assertion of being*, and those who listen find themselves making a parallel set of assertions of their own.

Once time enters the equation, "faithful reproduction" goes out the window. No matter how much things "are the same," the position on the timeline has changed. That position, in turn, means a change in the perspective of the past and anticipations of the future. This means that listening can always be fresh, even when a recording is involved; but there is still the risk of an experience of the present feeling too much like an "instant replay" of the past.

How, then, does one deal with a new recording of a composer like Tchaikovsky, whose music (particularly his last three symphonies) have been recorded unto an extreme? One approach is to go back to those fifteenth-century scholars and think more rhetorically about either what the music is trying to say or how it is trying to say it. On this new recording of Opus 74, there is a sense that the focus seems to be on the "how," rather than the "what." Honeck's "how" seems to be distinguished by attention to contours of changing dynamic levels, both at the level of phrasing and over the scope of the entire symphony. There is a strong impression that Honeck is treating the performance of Opus 74 as a journey and then using dynamics to draw attention to the "landmarks" encountered along that journey. This probably would have been clearer to those sitting in Heinz Hall, but enough of it seems to have carried over to his

new recording, making the performance an experience a bit like learning something new about an old friend.

In that respect his treatment of *Rusalka* is “something completely different.” It would be no surprise to learn that just about everyone in the audience for those performances in April of 2015 knew very little about the opera and that those who knew something were limited to the “Song to the Moon,” which has become a recital favorite. That latter group will be hard to please, since they are sitting on their hands waiting for the one fragment they know to come along (and, because the piece is about twenty minutes in duration, they have to wait for quite a spell).

On the other hand one can just take this as an introduction of an approach to making music that follows paths different from those encountered in Dvořák's more familiar orchestral writing. To return to the Tchaikovsky metaphor, this is a journey in which the listener will have to figure out the landmarks for himself/herself. This is not necessarily an easy matter; but, for those who have this recording, it will become easier for those willing to return to the final track on the album from time to time.

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