

TCHAIKOVSKY - Symphony 6 ; DVORAK - Rusalka Fantasy Reference Recordings FR-720 [MC] Classical Music Reviews: May 2106

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Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

[Symphony No.6](#) in B minor, Op. 74 '*Pathétique*' (1893) [46:41]

Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

'Rusalka Fantasy' orchestral suite from opera *Rusalka* (1900) [20:11]

(conceptualized by Manfred Honeck: realised by Tomás Ille)

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck

rec. live 17/19 April, 2015, Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

REFERENCE RECORDINGS FR-720 SACD [67:03]

Consistently impressive is the ongoing 'Pittsburgh Live!' series from the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under its music director Manfred Honeck. I made its release of the Beethoven Symphonies No's 5 and 7 as one of my 'Records of the Year' for 2015. Now for the fifth album in this enthusiastically admired series Honeck has turned his attention to Tchaikovsky's enduringly popular Sixth Symphony '*Pathétique*' together with the world première recording of the newly arranged '*Rusalka Fantasy*'. These 2015 accounts were recorded in live performance at the Heinz Hall the orchestra's Pittsburgh home.

Universally known as the '*Pathétique*' Tchaikovsky's Sixth is his most deeply moving and profound score. Once again the struggle against fate is central to a work which was to be Tchaikovsky's last. The première took place in October 1893 in Saint Petersburg and just over a week later the composer was dead. Few musical farewells to the world are more affecting. This is a beautifully proportioned reading by Honeck and in the opening movement, *Allegro non troppo* I was struck by the crisp and engaging playing. With restrained passion Honeck resists the temptation to wallow and there is a gloriously temperamental power that one feels might explode at any moment. From start to finish the *Allegro con grazia* flows elegantly with all the dreamlike elegance of a Viennese waltz. Under Honeck the strikingly played *Scherzo* evokes a 'Midsummer Night's Dream' scene of nocturnal reverie of elves, fairies and spirits deep in the forest. The way Honeck builds up the orchestral weight

and volume is compellingly dramatic. Remarkable is how Tchaikovsky manages to close the symphony with a slow movement. The descending phrases create a deep melancholy together with a chorale of sorrow on the brass and winds as if mirroring the human spirit slowly fading away. This cry of anguish is probably unequalled in the history of music. Honeck and his Pittsburgh players obtain a maelstrom of emotions that can leave the listener crushed. With the Pittsburgh orchestra on world class form this is a moving account of the '*Pathétique*' Symphony that can join the echelons of the finest recordings. Nonetheless I wouldn't wish to replace the opulently dramatic reading from Valery Gergiev and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, recorded in 2004 at the Musikverein, Vienna on Philips. Of the older mono recordings I remain a great admirer of the compelling 1956 Konzerthaus Vienna account from the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under Evgeny Mravinsky on Deutsche Grammophon.

During his time as an orchestral player with the Vienna State Opera performing Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, sometimes known as a 'lyric fairy tale', Honeck was inspired to create his own orchestral arrangement. Some years later he commissioned Czech composer Tomáš Ille to prepare an orchestral suite from the opera, the '*Rusalka Fantasy*' which is premièred here. After the bold celebratory opening the work displays ravishing melodies, notably the renowned theme from 'Song to the Moon' and predominately inhabits a dreamy, rather ethereal quality. Perhaps the different phases of the work come just a touch too quick, not surprisingly lacking sufficient development. Yet on the whole this is a most rewarding score full of fascinating ideas which aptly demonstrates Dvořák's creative power. The '*Rusalka Fantasy*' is a work that I can see being taken up in the concert hall.

Recorded by Soundmirror in live concert performances at Heinz Hall, Pittsburgh the sound quality from this hybrid SACD on my standard player is crystal clear with realistic presence and satisfying balance. Both enlightening and absorbing, Manfred Honeck's detailed essay in the accompanying booklet is extremely helpful in putting forward his take on the genesis of the '*Pathétique*' and explaining in some detail the rationale behind much of this interpretation. I especially enjoyed reading how Maris Jansons, who preceded Honeck at Pittsburgh, would highlight a potential pitfall of interpreting Tchaikovsky with the adage "*it is not necessary to add sugar to honey.*"

Michael Cookson



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