

Profil

By Manuel Brug

No Arrogance

Manfred Honeck, the conductor from Vorarlberg, Austria, has worked his way into the premier league of his field. He is giving guest performances in his old home with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Where are Pittsburgh's secrets? This beautiful city, green and picturesquely situated, as if a peninsula, on the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, has a functioning Downtown that is not deserted at night. There is even a market square with street cafés in the shadow of the postmodern glass and steel cathedral built by Philip Johnson.

The time of heavy industry in the city with America's biggest inland harbour, but a population of just 300,000, is long gone. These days Pittsburgh banks on universities, clinics and services as well as clean business, which also includes culture. It does not do this just with its rich museums, but also with the Cultural District in the heart of the revived city. Its flagship is the 121-year-old Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO). It resides in the Heinz Hall, a marble-clad venue donated by the ketchup dynasty in 1970. Here at last we understand why the theatre seats have to be velvety red: 2600 examples of corporate identity.

This vibrantly festive setting is home to one of the best orchestras in the country, but one that has strangely never found its way into the ominous 'Top Five'. Was the provincial location to blame? And yet it has attracted luminaries such as Otto Klemperer, Fritz Reiner, William Steinberg and André Previn as principal conductors: strict orchestral educators who trained their ensemble with a cast-iron hand to perform with precision. This resulted in a sleek high-performance instrument that glowed at fever pitch as red hot as the steel did and was given its finishing touch by Lorin Maazel between 1988 and 1996.

However, it was only given soul by one of the best, most loving orchestral educators: Mariss Jansons was in charge here between 1996 and 2004. Since 2008 (and at least until 2020) it will continue to be nurtured and optimized in Jansons's spirit by Manfred Honeck. After the recent death of Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the 57-year-old Manfred Honeck from Vorarlberg – along with Franz Welser-Möst – is seen as the most important Austrian conductor. He is not just the preferred musical partner of Anne-Sophie Mutter, he was also under consideration to lead the New York Philharmonic. But Honeck is happy in Pittsburgh. Everything here is manageable and innovative. With the upcoming European tour he wants to prove the quality of the PSO. As a point of honour, besides a guest performance in Bregenz (29 May), there will be three full days in Vienna's Musikverein (26–28 May). The violinist Leonidas Kavakos, the piano genius Daniil Trifonov and the mischievous percussionist Martin Grubinger take turns as soloists.

Honeck, a conductor who discovered his craft late, and who played the viola for a long time with the Vienna Philharmonic, has now, in his mid-fifties, audibly grown and has become more confident. He learned one thing immediately when he switched sides, he said: 'You must never be inauthentic. I know how badly it comes across when a conductor tries to be someone else out of fear or arrogance. I'm always myself.' After eight years he is 'still surprised by the enthusiasm, by the excitement, which however can quickly take on an American pragmatic, concrete expression. They don't just talk here. There's action. But you have to do something for that. That's what this fantastically diverse orchestra, which plays pop and classical music, experiments with ever new formats and which is very open, is able to do.'

The PSO is an American-European mix, Honeck adds. "Pennsylvania is a state shaped by immigrants; there were once many Germans in Pittsburgh. You can still sense that." He says he still likes going on tour, even though it is financial madness and a security nightmare. "But the orchestra needs the exchange, and we come home every time with the knowledge that our institution so steeped in tradition is still better known in Europe than the city's football, baseball and ice hockey teams."

Indeed, the PSO delivers the best kind of edutainment, including innovative concert formats, which the young conductor Steve Hackman incorporates in club nights after the concerts, or with diverse rock music adaptations. Using activities like this, the new German finance manager Christian Schörnisch tries to make his orchestra attractive with the new departments of Google and Facebook which are currently moving into the city.

And of course the upcoming European tour will also be accompanied by a business delegation. After all, the orchestra is the biggest, long uncovered secret of Pittsburgh, a city now flourishing in the 21st century.