

## The Symphony Orchestra of Pittsburgh: A taste of Vienna in the United States

Caption under photo:

Manfred Honeck and his Symphony Orchestra of Pittsburgh will be at Bozar this evening.

This Wednesday the first of June, the Symphony Orchestra of Pittsburgh will take the stage at Bozar with the formidable soloist Daniil Trifonov in Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2.

At the head of the orchestra is the Music Director, Manfred Honeck. Since starting out as a violinist with the Vienna Philharmonic and now as the appointed director of the orchestra, he is well placed to talk about an American orchestra that has inherited strong European traditions from leaders like Reiner\*, Klemperer and Steinberg.

Do you recognize yourself in this European orchestral tradition?

Absolutely. I can even say that this was one of the many reasons for my accepting, because this tradition goes such a long way back.

What is it like working in Pittsburgh?

The commitment is total. The musicians come to the first rehearsal 100% prepared, so that we can start our substantive work immediately. We talk about the power of nuances, dynamics, and colors. Their flexibility is admirable. They read *The Rite of Spring* with an amazing clarity and rhythmic sensibility; and at the same time, they know how to find that expressive sweetness that has all the charms of Brahms. In some ways, their flexibility is reminiscent of the old habits that many European orchestras do not care for today. For example, the *rubato*. Making the slightest variations in breathing can sometimes infuse small changes into the tempo and breathe new life into a great phrase. Throughout the 19th and first half of 20th centuries, the *rubato* was an essential expressive tool, albeit sometimes used to excess. But the composers knew it and were using it.

How does an orchestra survive today in the United States?

We enjoy the incredible loyalty and patronage of the entire regional community. Even during the worst of times when the city's core industries of coal, steel and glass were in crisis, maintaining a high-quality and vibrant cultural life remained a spearhead in the city's program of transformation. American orchestras have learned to draw strength from their constraints. Without public money, they only live on if they have public and private donors. And the public, they have to get it and that means by all means possible. Even the brief talks and explanations that happen just before a concert are good. People have no real idea about the implications of the first few chords of Beethoven 5<sup>th</sup>. But, if you explain it to them, then they are happy and have the keys to integral listening. They can go home and listen to a CD of the work that we just played. Worldwide, schools

have swept away music education. Hence, it is up to the musical institutions to take over. In the US, we are just 20 to 30 years into this approach.

In Brussels, you are going to play symphony by Haydn. This is not so common...

But this is so important! Haydn is a key composer for a symphony orchestra because you hear absolutely everything. It is a very Austrian approach to music, full of references to popular music. This music is at the same time full of very typical humor and genuine originality.

You are going to conduct an unpublished piece by Strauss?

Even I have to admit that I am the author of this orchestral transcription of the music for *Elektra*. This formerly very common practice allowed people everywhere to share the music of an opera during a time when neither records nor compact discs existed. Strauss penned this for his *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*\*. This had never been done before for *Elektra* and yet it is a very effective way to show all the harmonic boldness and complexity of this fabulous music.

Interview by Serge Martin

PBA, Wednesday June 1<sup>st</sup>. Reservations: 02 507 82 00 or [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be)

Beethoven Symphonies No. 5 and No. 7 : Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Honeck (Reference Recordings)

\*Misidentified in the French article as "Renier" and "Fraue öhne Schatten" respectively.