

This recording of Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' is a 'monument' in every sense of the word. Five, to be precise.

With 33 recordings of Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony in Super Audio alone, there is no shortage of choice. Reference recordings of the past have been remastered in high resolution, like the legendary Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic, some with drawbacks: Dated sound quality, stereo only, imperfect remastering, expensive etc. Newer ones, recorded with the latest techniques, have been added with varying quality to the catalogue. Though some are very good, not all are excellent in all departments. Moreover, preferences have and will continue to differ on 'the monuments of music history'; it will not come as a surprise that any newcomer in this field will be regarded with much circumspection.

Some want more passion, others more drama and others again, more 'noise'. And in many a case, expectation or cultural tradition may also play a role in someone's appreciation: the whack on the bass drum that didn't come off as loud as expected or the waltz that wasn't as Viennese as it should have been, etc.

It is now customary that conductors or soloists give in the liner notes their personal views on the music they play. Manfred Honeck, however, goes much further in that we are allowed to not only get his well-documented insight in the music, but are also made privy to his intimate views on interpretation, and what's more: why and where he thought adaptations were desirable or needed to enhance the essence of what, in his view, Tchaikovsky has to tell. This is not a trivial matter. Like a reviewer, the more you say, the more you are vulnerable to criticism. I, for one, value Honeck's considerations, - to be agreed on or not - very highly; it makes for so much more understanding of what he endeavours to bring about. This is my first, positive 'sense' of the word 'monumental'.

My second 'sense', concerns the way he conducts. Although I have never been present at one of his performances, listening is enough to understand that Honeck must be someone with a phenomenal authority. Conveying ideas to an orchestra is one thing, but letting an orchestral body of around 100 musicians carry them out like clockwork, as if holding everyone on a personal string, can only be done if musicians believe in their master and have confidence in what he is asking them to do. This makes a Chef stand out from the crowd. Manfred Honeck is such a Chef.

The third 'sense' is the called The Pittsburgh Symphony. What a fine example of committed playing. Live recordings are either the best or the worst in comparison to an empty hall recording session. If the spark between audience and musicians gets across, this invariably draws out the best in every performance. This has clearly happened here. Any of the three concerts in Heinz Hall, Pittsburgh, from which this recording has been assembled, must have been an unforgettable event. Wish I could have been there, too!

Moving on to the recording, we get to the fourth 'sense'. As with previous releases in the Reference Recordings 'Fresh!' series, the recording has been entrusted to 'Sound Mirror' from Boston, Massachusetts. Not only are they top notch, they also have extended experience with recording in Heinz Hall. In order to capture the starting pppppp passage I had to turn up the volume considerably. No problem: All that follows passes, up to the loudest ffff passages, without any sign of strain or distortion.

The orchestral balance, which is basically the task of the conductor, but has here been worked out during 'extensive listening sessions with Maestro Honeck and orchestra musicians ... in refining the final balance', gives preference to putting the listener in the best seat in the Hall, with the surround speakers only adding ambiance and depth in the sound stage. The recording was made and post produced in DSD 256. (For a caveat see my remark below).

The final fifth and best 'sense' is Honeck's rendition. I share his views on the pitfalls, especially the danger of excessiveness. Controlled emotion reinforces feelings better than excessive drama. Let me quote here one of his views with which I wholly concur: "Regarding the second pitfall, excessive and sustained dynamic levels without moderation, within the numerous risings and eruptions that are directly indicated by Tchaikovsky, one must be careful not to always play the written fff. Otherwise, this could lead to 'Tchaikovsky noise' ... It is also necessary... to intervene at times...for variety in the endless lines in the third movement, all indicated fff. Instead, I reduce the volume at the beginning in an effort to make the rising dynamics possible and audible". This is, indeed, not only clearly noticeable, but also done with an extraordinary vivid response from the orchestra, as if the Maestro had a master volume switch on the rostrum.

When comparing different versions of the 'Pathétique' the first thing I always do, is listen to the final movement, which comes as an epilogue after the tumultuous end of the third (it is not unusual that less experienced audiences applaud, expecting the symphony to be finished). Honeck's 'Adagio lamentoso' is marked by a deeply felt sorrow, ending in acceptance of fate and ultimate resignation, without dragging the listener into a tearfully sentimental drama. For me, this gives evidence of having understood what the symphony is about, at least as I see it: A darkly spirited and sometimes fighting statement of life, with all the emotions and events it unavoidably entails; embracing feelings of sheer happiness and utter tragedy, while ultimately accepting its finality.

Without going into a detailed description of each movement, it is obvious that this symphony gets a personal, yet most fascinating rendition; never too much, nor too little. In my dictionary Pathétique is not the same as 'pathetic' (as some believe, translating it literally from French), but 'emotionally passionate'. We owe it to Maestro Honeck, as well as his musicians and the expert recording team that he gets this feeling so indisputably across.

My sixth sense tells me, that this recording will score high on anyone's short-list.

For Europeans I may add that they, too, will soon be able to listen 'live' to Manfred Honeck and his Pittsburghers in numerous towns across Austria, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland during their forthcoming European tour (May/June 2016).

[There is one point, though, that needs to be addressed: At the beginning of the final movement, before the violins set in, there is a soft sound, lasting less than a second, but which may for some nonetheless be disturbing. Sound Mirror responded by saying: "The slight noise heard there is the sound of the conductor and orchestra members breathing as they start to play"].

People often complain if the full capacity of a disk has not been adequately used. The symphony lasting

around 47 minutes, there is, technically speaking, about 33 minutes left for an additional work. The overture 'Romeo & Juliet' is an obvious choice, sometimes placed at the beginning rather than the end, like Paavo Järvi/Cicineti Symphony/Telarc. Daniele Gatti (Harmonia Mundi USA) has opted for the 'Serenade for Strings' after the symphony. It's unobtrusive, but in my opinion the best thing to hear at the end of the final movement is: Nothing at all. Like Dmitri Kitajenko / OEMS Classics (his Pathétique lasting for more than 50 minutes anyway) & several others have judged best.

Honeck gives us a 20 minutes compilation of melodies from Dvorak's opera 'Rusalka', in what is labeled 'Rusalka Fantasy'. The assembly, for which he has teamed up with Tomáš Ille "who brilliantly carried out the technical work", is well done, but starts, kind of shockingly, with 'Festive music that can be heard from the hall where lights are now blazing..' (beginning of act 2). One may question the wisdom of adding such 'incidental music', borrowed from a tragic fairy-tale of a water nymph who longs to become human. I have my doubts.

And although it is said that a violin is the instrument that comes closest to the human voice, the violin solo of concertmaster Noah Bendix-Balgley comes nowhere near the voice of Renée Fleming in her interpretation of 'Rusalka's Song to the Moon' (Czech Philharmonic/Sir Charles Mackerras/Decca).

A strong recommendation for Tchaikowsky, which is an absolute masterpiece in Honeck's rendition, but the rest is best switched off before it starts. (You can always listen to it separately on another occasion)

My stars are for the symphony only.

Blangy le Château,
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Performance:

Sonics (Stereo):

Sonics (Multichannel):

