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Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6, Dvořák: Rusalka Fantasy *Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck* (Reference)

Any new disc from [this particular team](#) is usually an event, and this one keeps up the trend. It's unusual to find a leading conductor (Ivan Fischer is another) who doesn't seem set on setting down complete cycles of everything. Manfred Honeck's discography is highly selective, and all the better for it. His lucid sleeve note warns against "exaggeration, excessiveness and impatience" in [Tchaikovsky](#), though this performance is among the most exciting and emotionally charged I've heard. Honeck's careful handling of Tchaikovsky's dynamic markings pays enormous dividends. Some passages exist on the very edge of audibility (like the descending bassoon line in the first movement, here played on bass clarinet) and the *ffff* explosions will rattle your sash windows. There's a roaring bass trombone pedal at the close of the first movement's collapse which is as good as that on Mravinsky's old Soviet LP, and this is the only recording I know where you can really clearly hear the rasping stopped horns at the Finale's climax.

But the excellence of the playing and sound engineering never draws undue attention to itself; what's compelling is the intelligence and musicality of the performance. The first movement's lyrical second theme really sings, and the development section rises to terrifying heights. The middle movements aren't underplayed, and the march's stealthy build up is truly electrifying. Tchaikovsky's pitch-black ending is overwhelming.

Light relief of sorts comes in the form of a single-movement *Rusalka Fantasy* based on Dvořák's opera, assembled by Honeck and the Czech composer Tomáš Ille. It works beautifully: the "Song to the Moon" transcribed idiomatically for solo violin, but this is more through-composed tone poem than pithy greatest hits selection. The opera's very distinctive Wagnerian flavour is undiluted. An outstanding disc, and not just for audiophiles. – Graham Rickson