

**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 Tomáš 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]

Besides the Tchaikovsky symphony Manfred Honeck here presents another of his orchestral fantasies containing music derived from an opera. I've previously encountered his Symphonic Suite extracted from Janáček's opera *Jenůfa* ([review](#)). Here the subject is another Czech opera, Dvořák's *Rusalka*. Honeck tells us that he first fell in love with this opera during the time when he was a member of the Vienna Philharmonic. I have to confess that with the exception of the famous 'Song to the Moon' I don't know the work so I found Honeck's detailed booklet note a great help. In it he points out the thematic material he has used and includes the timing in the recording at which we will hear each theme in question. The best-known part of the opera is the aforementioned 'Song to the Moon'. In this episode (11:49-15:40) the soprano vocal line is allotted to the orchestra's concertmaster. Here the solo is played by Noah Bendix-Balgley, featuring in his last recording with the Pittsburgh orchestra before departing for a similar role with the Berliner Philharmoniker. His gorgeous, silvery tone gives great pleasure. I have to leave it to those who know the opera better than I do to judge how successful Honeck's fantasy is. However, as a concert piece *per se* I thought it worked very well and the Pittsburgh orchestra plays it with relish and no little skill.

Honeck also provides the extensive booklet note for the symphony. Here, as well as discussing the composition of the work and the composer's death soon afterwards, he goes into significant detail about his own interpretative approach. In particular he points out instances where he made significant decisions regarding dynamics and other matters of detail and he includes within his description the timings within the recording at which all these points may be heard. Not all of the points are obvious to the ear unless one has a score but many of them are. Whether or not one agrees with all the decisions he has taken is less important than the evidence that his essay provides that he has approached a score which is commonly performed taking nothing for granted.

One comment is worth quoting. "When interpreting Tchaikovsky, I am aware of three potential dangers: first, exaggeration; second, excessiveness; and third, impatience." I applaud his refusal to court anything that might risk vulgarity and the results he obtains are frequently impressive though I do wonder if, in seeking to avoid the dangers of which he speaks he doesn't quite take enough risks.

I like the start of the first movement where Honeck invests the music with dignity. His heart is not constantly on his sleeve so that when Tchaikovsky becomes more passionate the contrast is more effectively made. The development section, the arrival of which is prefaced by a velvety clarinet, starts with a bang (9:47) and in the following bars there's welcome clarity in the fiery string writing. However, in some other versions that I've heard, such as Karajan's 1971 reading ([review](#)) or the legendary Mravinsky recording ([review](#)) the development positively explodes. Mravinsky's classic reading is in a class of its own hereabouts though Honeck achieves excitement too. His Pittsburgh orchestra can't quite match the sheer tonal weight of Karajan's Berliners or the steeliness of Mravinsky's Leningrad Philharmonic but their playing is still very impressive, Honeck is rather more restrained than Mravinsky, which brings its own rewards but in the last analysis I admire Honeck while Mravinsky leaves me gasping.

The second movement's 5/4 'waltz' is trim and dapper if, perhaps, just a shade on the brisk side. When the trio begins (2:29) Honeck briefly employs an echo and double-echo effect, which he explains in the booklet. It's unusual and it's not what's in the score but it's an interesting approach which I rather like. Given the comparative scale of the outer movements and the emotional power they contain it's easy to overlook the third movement as a high-spirited interlude. Honeck's notes confirm he's having none of that and his performance evidences great attention to detail. That's admirable, as is the extremely dexterous playing. As the end approaches Honeck twice reins in the dynamics (at 6:48 and at 7:45). These are very brief passages. I feel the second instance doesn't work very well; the effect is a bit fussy though I understand what the conductor is about here.

At the very start of the finale there's a curious sound just before the strings begin to play. At first I wondered if some of the players were reaching for the note, unlikely though that would be. Having listened several times, including through headphones, I'm none the wiser; it's a kind of whirring noise, akin to a fan. The sound is only soft but it's clearly audible. The *Andante* starts beautifully (2:37), with gorgeous strings and the horns increasingly eloquent as the passage unfolds. Mravinsky is very easeful at the start of the *Andante* but the intensity of his performance builds quite quickly. A number of Honeck's thoughtful touches make their mark in this movement. Among them is the prominence (not excessive) that he gives to the hand-stopped horns (7:30-8:04) and also the way he lets the soft tam-tam make its mark. Overall his is a fine account of the finale.

In summary Honeck's performance of this symphony is a thoughtful and thought-provoking rendition of a score that can suffer from over-familiarity. I respected and enjoyed his performance but I have to say that it's still Mravinsky who has me on the edge of my seat.

There's no applause after either work and, indeed, the audience is commendably silent. The sound on this hybrid SACD, engineered by Soundmirror, is very clear and has plenty of impact. My previous reviewing assignment prior to this was a BR Klassik release of a live performance of Dvořák's Eighth symphony conducted by Mariss Jansons. Comparing the two I think the Soundmirror engineering offers a more upfront experience. Their sound is very present and has

a wide dynamic range but on balance I don't find it as natural as the BR Klassik recording. However, I think anyone purchasing this disc will appreciate the clear and present recording. As I've already indicated, Manfred Honeck's notes are detailed and interesting.

[John Quinn](#)

Previous review: [Michael Cookson](#)