

http://dev.fanfarearchive.com/articles/atop/40_1/4014240.az_TCHAIKOVSKY_Symphony_6_DVO%C5%98%C3%81K.html

Download Review by [Jerry Dubins](#)

TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 6. DVOŘÁK Rusalka Fantasy (arr. M. Honeck / T. Ille) • Manfred Honeck, cond; Pittsburgh SO • REFERENCE 720 (Download: 67:03)



[Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 & Dvorák: Rusalka Fantasy](#)
[Audio CD; Hybrid SACD - DSD](#)
[Reference Recordings](#)

By all accounts, Manfred Honeck has revitalized the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and it seems that the musicians, audiences, and board members alike are happy with their now twice-renewed music director. My very first review of a Honeck release was of the conductor's Beethoven Fifth and Seventh Symphonies in 39:5, and my reactions weren't entirely positive. Even less favorable was James North's review in the same issue; he raised some of the very same concerns I did. Steven Kruger, on the other hand, heard the performances with different ears, finding no faults and loving every minute of them. Such diametrically opposing opinions from equally knowledgeable and qualified critics can be difficult to understand, but I think in no small part it's due to our personal expectations of a performance and the specifics we listen for in interpretation, execution, and recorded sound.

Whether the Beethoven release was the beginning of a cycle from Honeck or just a one-off I don't know, but he now turns his attention to Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony, a work of a very different stripe than any of Beethoven's symphonies. Something I said in that previous review seems to bear fruit here: "Honeck's greatest successes, thus far, seem to be in late Romantic to early 20th-century repertoire." This is a very fine Tchaikovsky "Pathétique"—not perfect, perhaps, but still highly commendable. My quibbles are minor ones, or, to put in another way, I'm about to praise with faint damning.

(1) The orchestral balance is a bit skewed towards the brass, which occasionally swamps the strings. But even if the strings weren't swamped, they don't quite match the sumptuousness of Philadelphia's strings in Ormandy's 1960 recording.

(2) I miss the clarity and bite that Pletnev achieves with the Russian National Orchestra on Pentatone, especially in the first-movement's development section; the sudden blast at the outset has the potential to stop or start the heart, depending on which state it's in at the time.

(3) Possibly my most serious issue concerns Honeck's fussing with tempos, which are generally a tad on the slow side. Try the exaggerated slowdown at the end of the first movement for one example, or the overstated ritards in the opening strains of the last movement. The main exception to the slowness is the third movement (*Allegro molto*), which is almost too fast for the players to keep up with, and in one or two places it is, as is evidenced by a stray note in the brass here and there and a bit of scrambling for notes in the strings.

Where Yevgeny Mravinsky, in his performance with the Leningrad Philharmonic, grips you in a vise and leaves you devastated at the end, Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra don't. The reason, I think, is that Honeck views the work episodically, proceeding from one major event to the next, instead of building the symphony to its overwhelmingly tragic end in a long, continuous arc.

I wouldn't put too much stock in these observations, however, for in the larger scheme of things, these are not disqualifying defects, and the playing of the Pittsburgh musicians, except in those few instances where Honeck drives them too hard, continues to be very, very impressive. It's just that with the likes of Mravinsky, Ormandy, Haitink, Giulini, Gergiev, Daniele Gatti, Andris Nelsons, Pletnev, Kitajenko, and other major competitors to contend with, Honeck's "Pathétique," fine as it is, is probably not going to be among the top 10.

A most enjoyable addition to this release, which should make it attractive even to buyers who already have a shelf full of Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique"s, is the world premiere of the *Rusalka Fantasy*, a sizeable, 20-minute orchestral suite drawn from Dvořák's opera in an arrangement by Honeck and Czech composer Tomáš Ille. As such things go it's very well done. To be honest, I think I derived more pleasure from the *Fantasy* than I did the symphony.--Jerry Dubins

This article originally appeared in Issue 40:1 (Sept/Oct 2016) of *Fanfare Magazine*.