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Download Review by [Steven Kruger](#)

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](#)

Manfred Honeck has a winner here again with the Pittsburgh Symphony. It would be hard to praise this recording too much. Not only does he bring us the most exciting recorded Tchaikovsky “Pathétique” I know—plus arrange a fine unified suite from Dvořák’s *Rusalka*—he’s taken trouble to pen the best CD program notes I recall reading anywhere, complete with audio index points and examples of what he’s trying to accomplish. Honeck’s observations about Tchaikovsky’s life and music are well thought out, profound and so easily understood, they should be used in school. This is how to do a recording.

Printed musical quotations and obscure terms are the literary curse and affectation of far too many program note booklets. They look good on the page, all those graphically reproduced clefs, black dots, and accents, but bewildered hordes in the audience are lost in church, so to speak, confronting lines of music most can’t sight-read. Then we give them the near-death experience of reading something like “And now, in inversion, four augmented sixth chords in B ♭ leading to the recapitulation of...” Sleep? Or is it suffering? None of that occurs here, fortunately.

Once again, as demonstrated in his recent CD of the Beethoven Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, Honeck’s conducting is replete with push-me-pull-you. He charges ahead with great energy, but can delay a cadence for all the emotion it contains when he wants to. One doesn’t have to be a cynic—or think of Richard Strauss speeding up to make his card game—to realize this sort of flexibility is the essence of good tempo choice. One doesn’t want to bore.

Reference Recordings has produced an up-close soundstage, perhaps fractionally dry because of audience presence. But I suspect we really have podium perspective and this is deliberate. Honeck writes of the care he’s taken with the recorded sound. Up close, Honeck’s volatile timpanist and Pittsburgh’s rock solid brasses are heard to fullest advantage. So is the fiendish intensity of every string figuration. The timpani, in particular, find myriad ways of surging forth and breaking step mid-roll. They add remarkable degrees of excitement when played this well.

Honeck's central climax in the first movement has a wonderful rolling quality, as if one were surfing over large waves with ever deeper troughs. I've waited decades to hear it done that way. This is Romantic phrasing. But unlike many Romantic conductors, who wimp out at the edges, Manfred Honeck knows how to slug hard and surge until you feel the "g" forces. He's all about dynamics and about surprising you subtly just when you need it. The lopsided waltz has a heartbeat. The march flattens you. The finale moves you but doesn't drip on you. I can't think of a better performance. And the sound is so solid you pinch yourself thinking it all real.

Similar infectious qualities inhabit the Rusalka Fantasy. This is some of Dvořák's best music—much of it vaguely familiar and Slavonic Dance-like even if you don't know the opera. Honeck has put together a suite which makes musical sense and holds together. It's a symphonic synthesis, not a series of "numbers." A sidelight (and highlight) to this production is the violin performance of the Song to the Moon by the Pittsburgh Symphony's 32-year-old concertmaster, Noah Bendix-Balgley. This was his last concert before taking up the post of concertmaster at the Berlin Philharmonic. One isn't surprised. The Pittsburgh Symphony is one of the world's great orchestras. It always has been. But there is something different now. It's in the limelight. And one profoundly thanks Manfred Honeck for that. --Steven Kruger

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