

Review: Honeck recording a powerful feat

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A recording is a special kind of memento because it does more than bring a memory to mind. It provides its own immediate experience.

This new recording by Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (<http://www.pittsburghsymphony.org/>) of orchestral suites from two great operas by Richard Strauss was recorded in concert near the end of last season. The recorded sound realistically captures the thrilling sonorities of both solos and the full ensemble performing with charismatic musicianship.

The Reference Recordings release, which is a hybrid SACD playable on all compact disc machines, pairs a new suite from “Elektra” created by Honeck with the familiar one of “Der Rosenkavalier” created by conductor Artur Rodzinski during World War II.

The suite from “Elektra” is the latest in a series of arrangements Honeck has made during his time in Pittsburgh. Suites from “Jenufa” and “Rusalka” have previously been released on CD. His predecessor, Lorin Maazel, recorded his “Tannhauser Without Words” with the Pittsburgh Symphony and also performed his “Ring Without Words” at Heinz Hall (http://pso.culturaldistrict.org/pso_home/), although he recorded it with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Strauss wrote "Elektra" in 1909, proceeding even further with the psychologically intense and musically edgy style he had introduced in "Salome," which Pittsburgh Opera (<http://pittsburghopera.org/>) presented earlier this month. Both are one-act operas lasting about 100 minutes.

Honeck's "Elektra" Suite, created with Tomas Ille, is about one-third the duration of the opera. It generally follows the course of the opera, although Elektra's brother Orest, who will kill their mother and stepfather, twice pops up out of sequence.

Honeck's suite skillfully introduces the leitmotifs of the characters, starting with Elektra's father, the dead King Agamemnon, and provides enough continuation for the personalities to be fleshed out as the drama develops.

The performance is more than bold because Honeck shows exceptional sympathy for the lyrical side of the opera's troubled souls.

When Strauss wrote "Der Rosenkavalier" two years after "Elektra," he turned away from cutting-edge musical language in favor of an evocation of old Vienna. The suite from the opera is filled with favorite moments and concludes with a big, extroverted waltz rather than the lightly playful ending of the opera.

Honeck and the orchestra give a beautiful and affectionate performance of the suite. Wind and brass solos are filled with color and nuance fully in accord with Honeck's approach. Noah Bendix-Balgley's violin solos are especially treasurable. The soulful Trio from Act 3 is quite slow on this recording and lives in the moment.

The beauty and power of the orchestra's playing on this recording is a reminder of what's at stake in the strike which began Sept. 30. As the musicians and management negotiate, their goals need to include preserving this magnitude of excellence.

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Strauss: 'Elektra' and 'Der Rosenkavalier' Suites

Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (<http://www.pittsburghsymphony.org/>)
(Reference Recordings 722)

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