

<http://www.cdchoice.co.uk/>



STRAUSS: ELEKTRA & DER ROSENKAVALIER SUITES, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Manfred Honeck/Reference Recordings SACD FR-722

Review by Graham Williams -

All Straussians will be intrigued by this latest release from Manfred Honeck and his marvellous Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra of orchestral suites from what many would regard as the greatest of the composer's fifteen operas - Elektra and Der Rosenkavalier, (though I would also include Salome and Die Frau ohne Schatten in any shortlist). Honeck has already demonstrated his mastery of the Strauss idiom in his previous fine accounts of some of the tone poems for both the Reference Recordings and Exton labels so the bar is set very high for any new release in this series.

The first item on the disc is the world premiere recording of a suite from Strauss's fourth opera Elektra. This opera, the composer's first collaboration with the poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, could fairly be described as a tone poem with voices, since the orchestra is without doubt the main protagonist. Of course, as well as being fully staged in the opera house, Elektra is often given in concert performance and this is possibly one of the reasons why Honeck, in collaboration with the Czech composer Tomáš Ille, has produced this 'Symphonic Rhapsody', first heard in Pittsburgh in 2014, as a means to bring the appreciation of Strauss's searing masterpiece to an even wider audience.

Honeck and Ille have carried out what was surely a challenging task with considerable skill and fashioned a coherent and gripping single-movement piece lasting 33'39" that convincingly encapsulates both the dramatic power of Strauss's music and the crux of the original blood soaked tragedy. In the liner notes accompanying this superbly recorded SACD, Honeck provides a guide (with timings) to the music he has selected for his arrangement. By and large this follows the events of the story closely but the inclusion of some cue points on the disc would have been helpful for listeners unfamiliar with the opera's action. Needless to say the incredible richness of the scoring and the complexity of the composer's harmonic vocabulary also provide a marvellous showcase for the remarkable virtuosity of the Pittsburgh musicians who unflinchingly rise to the challenge with incisive playing that generates scorching levels of visceral excitement.

The contrast between the music of Strauss's first collaboration with Hofmannsthal and his second, 'Der Rosenkavalier', could hardly be more marked. Though the composer arranged some of the work's many waltzes for concert performance he never compiled a suite from the opera and what is known as the 'Rosenkavalier Suite' is believed to be the work of the conductor Artur Rodzinski.

Der Rosenkavalier has always been the horn player's opera par excellence, something the magnificent horn section of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra confirm at the opening of the suite, while a few bars later they deliver Strauss's orgasmic whoopings with thrilling relish. Honeck's subtly nuanced use of rubato and portamento in Ochs's waltz has the natural feel that one would expect from a conductor with his Viennese training and experience as a former member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, but the way he has communicated this style to his players is nothing short of miraculous. All the lyrical passages such as the Act II Presentation of the Silver Rose and the glorious final Trio are conveyed with heart melting tenderness and sumptuous tone, and though some might question his languid tempi for such sections in a performance of the complete opera, they seem entirely appropriate here. In contrast to the opera, Rodzinski's arrangement ends resplendently with a boisterous waltz delivered with unabashed élan by the PSO.

Thanks to the efforts of the Soundmirror team the opulence, spaciousness and vividness of the recording quality of this hybrid SACD (5.1 surround, stereo SACD and CD stereo) is all that one could wish for.