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Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony

Piotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky: Symphony #6 in B minor "Pathétique", Op. 74 Antonín Dvořák: Fantasy "Rusalka" (arr. Honeck/Ille)

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck Reference Recordings fresh! SACD FR-720 Hybrid Multichannel 67:03

Having been impressed with – but not especially moved by – Bychkov's new reading of this symphony with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra on Decca, I turned to this early 2016 release from Manfred Honeck and his estimable Pittsburgh Symphony. This is easily the better recorded of the two, although the Czech forces have always been recorded well and they remain one of the finest orchestras in Europe. But Manfred Honeck – who has drawn rave reviews from nearly everyone – is a wholly different beast. He once again revitalizes a tired warhorse, and gives us a unique coupling in the form of one of his opera suites, here called a "Fantasy".



Some of us think it's "fantasy" to have a recording that makes us care about Tchaikovsky again. Like too many composers, it's easy to sneer at his endless streams of melody and wonder what might have been had he lived longer. The fact is that he's a very great composer, and Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony have the courtesy to treat him like one. Much like his excellent pairing of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, there's no one thing that you can point at and say that's the quality that makes the partnership so outstanding. For older collectors, imagine the polish of Ormandy, the discipline of Szell, the fervor of Bernstein and Munch, and the brass playing and fanatical attention to detail of Reiner. These are the qualities that come together to define Pittsburgh right now, so thank God, their work stoppage was only a few weeks. They are excellent. And though I listed the conductors of yore and the qualities of their orchestras, Honeck is not a clone of any of them, but a real musical voice and talent that can make nearly any orchestra sound great.

This recording may not be the "best" recording of the Sixth ever. One could even argue that it's not even the best recording from these forces. But it is a serious entry into the Tchaikovsky discography. Passionately played and deeply committed, the music comes to life in a way that few modern recordings do. The woodwind and brass playing is by now a known quantity, but the whole orchestra is one of the finest in the country. The ferocious climaxes contrast wonderfully with some stunning quieter moments. A rather measured second movement waltz is a hair slower than ideal, but how much more flowing and danceable it proves than Bychkov's Decca reading. And as beautiful as the latter's Czech forces are, Pittsburgh has nothing to fear. There's tons of detail to appreciate in the third movement, which is crisply articulated without ever being too light. The brass fanfares are thrilling, and complimented by some delicious wind playing. The finale is remarkably cohesive and generates its emotional weight through attention to phrasing as opposed to pulling the tempo about.

How nice to have a Dvořák coupling as opposed to the usual *Roméo & Juliet*! Like all Honeck's opera suites, he had some help from one Mr. Tomáš Ille, but generally they work well as a team and the effect is convincing. Honeck is a tremendous Dvořák conductor, and his affinity for Czech music is never in doubt. Certainly, this is a reasonable way to introduce yourself to the opera *Rusalka*, especially if you don't feel like tracking down a complete recording on an import label somewhere. As might be expected, the orchestra plays fabulously, and they are better recorded and engaged than the Czech Philharmonic's recent forays into music they supposedly own. The sound on this program is somewhat less than Reference Recordings' finest, but still commands respect. Overall, this is an adventurous and invigorating program that – like everything from Pittsburgh recently – may change the way you look at the music you thought yo knew.



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