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Richard Strauss

Suite "Elektra" (arr. Honeck/Ille) Suite "Der Rosenkavalier" (arr. Rodzinski)

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck Reference Recordings fresh! SACD FR-772 Hybrid Multichannel

Back in 2013, a package arrived at my childhood home containing Reference Recordings FR-707. As the first disc in a newly-minted partnership between the label and the Pittsburgh Symphony, it proved to be an astonishing success. For me, personally, it was the first album review that gained wider readership, and I am thankful to everyone – at Classical Net, at Reference Recordings, and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra – for their support of my (very) modest career as a writer on music. I have not loved everything from this team, being possibly the only person to not wholly embrace the conductor's Dvořák Eighth, but I am to be counted among those excited to see them revisit Strauss.



Manfred Honeck is hugely talented. I love his Strauss, his Mahler, his Beethoven, his Dvořák outside that Eighth, and his Bruckner. He has at his disposal an equally talented gift of players, happily back to work after a thankfully short work stoppage. There are perhaps no better brass players in the world. As they proved with their last Strauss disc, and especially the evergreen coupling of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh, this partnership is artistically self-aware and able to recognize the legacy set down before them. It's so unusual to hear conductors acknowledge their predecessors in the classical music world, but both here and on that Beethoven release, Honeck dares to mention conductors and artists who have already made their stamp on this music. In a market where everyone has a favorite conductor and orchestra, that takes guts, and is incredibly refreshing.

But I said they were also self-aware, and they recognize that they have what it takes to *become* that favorite conductor and orchestra. Armed with one of the finest brass sections in the world, superlative overall ensemble quality, and almost automatically fine engineering, each CD release becomes an event. Their Tchaikovsky Sixth strikes me as one of the most musical versions available, and so it proves with these suites. I'm not sure what the deal is with all these opera suites from Honeck, but the music is great and we probably shouldn't complain. The *Der Rosenkavalier* selections arranged by Rodzinski are delightfully fresh and full of vigor. Those – by now – legendary Pittsburgh horns nearly steal the show by themselves, but everyone sounds terrific. The 24-plus minutes literally fly by, and I wouldn't be shocked if you simply repeated the track again.

I imagine that the main attraction is the new Suite from *Elektra*, arranged by the conductor with help from Tomáš Ille. Ille also collaborated with Honeck on his suites from *Jenůfa* and most recently *Rusalka*. The music is already great, and Honeck's own notes generously explain his musical selections for his personal vision of the suite. Again, the orchestra is simply a wonder, and the excellent sound gives a realistic and thrilling view even from my uninspiring sound system. I don't miss all the singing (or is it wailing and gnashing?) and I suspect that talented school and community orchestras will be just as interested in getting their hands on the music as you should be. As with *Rosenkavalier*, there are no real dead spots, and the work feels like much less than what it is, which is a hair over a half hour. My only complaint about this disc is that neither suite is multitracked; hardly a surprise for *Rosenkavalier*, but I wouldn't have minded being able to explore Honeck's creation manually. But that's a small quibble for an otherwise outstanding project. For several reasons, these players – who I hasten to add, don't know me from Adam – are very special to me. I hope that projects like this prove equally rewarding for you.



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