

# MUSICAL TORONTO



*If You Think **Classical Music** is Dead, You're Dead Wrong!*

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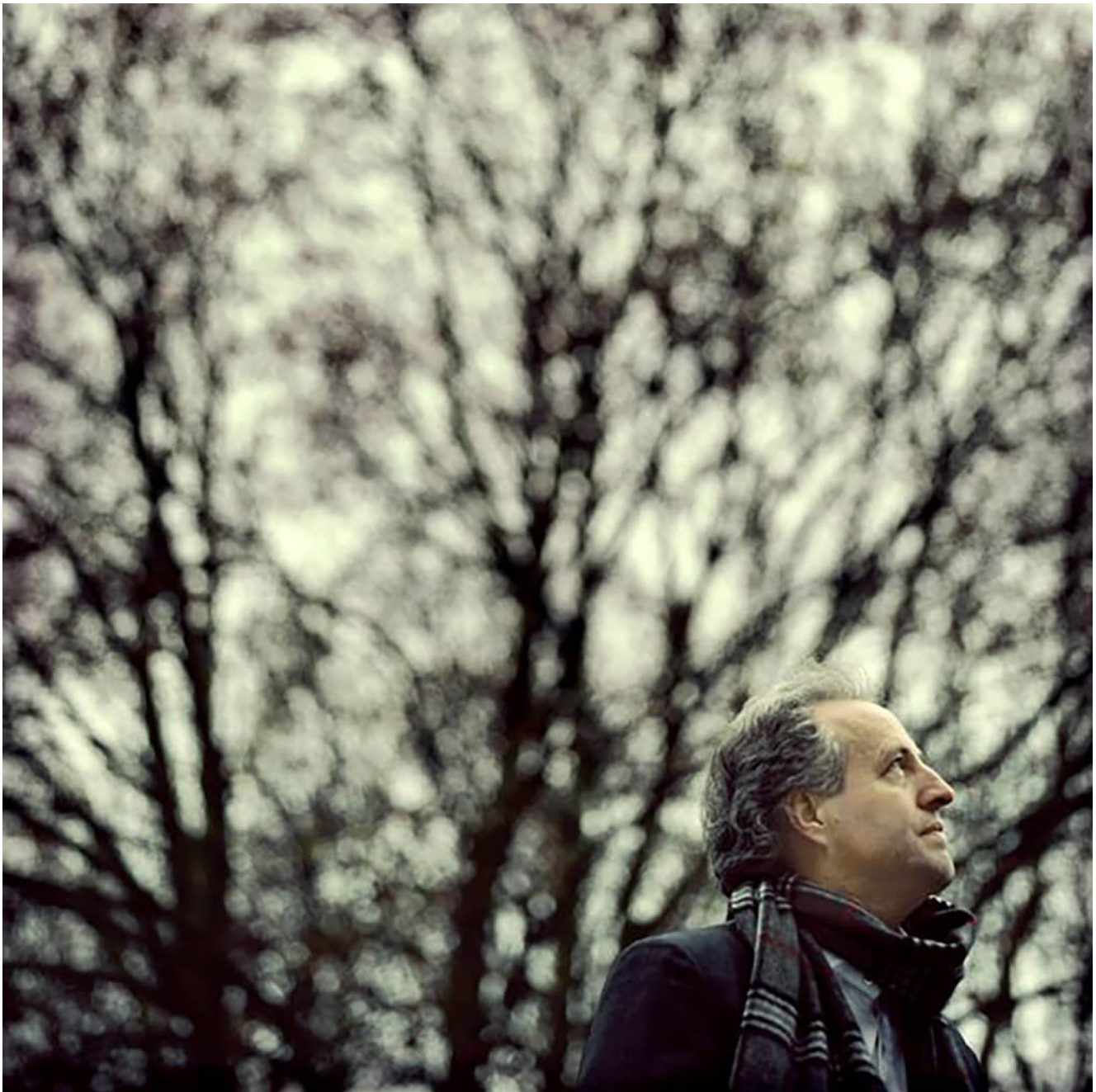
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## **RECORD KEEPING | Manfred Honeck Injects Fire Into Strauss Elektra Release**

By Paul E. Robinson on January 24, 2017



Manfred Honeck (Photo: Felix Broede)

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania is often called “Steel City,” a nickname based on its great history of steel manufacturing. When global competition eventually caught up with it in the 1980s, many of its steel mills began to close. In the decades since, Pittsburgh has re-created itself with a wide diversity of major businesses and its once-crumbling downtown is now a vibrant hub of business and entertainment. The Pittsburgh metropolitan area totals about 2.6 million people of many different ethnic backgrounds. Recent surveys have consistently listed Pittsburgh as one of the most liveable cities in the world.

I recently enjoyed a powerful reminder of Pittsburgh and its history in the remarkable film *Fences*, based on a play by August Wilson (1945-2005), one of ten which comprise “The Pittsburgh Cycle”.

Wilson grew up in the city and has offered unique insight into his community, and its people, especially those who live in African-American neighbourhoods.

The Pittsburgh Symphony (PSO) is one of the glories of the city's cultural life. Its list of music directors reads like a who's who of major conductors:

- Otto Klemperer (1937-38)
- Fritz Reiner (1938-48)
- William Steinberg (1952-76)
- Andre Previn (1976-84)
- Lorin Maazel (1984-96)
- Mariss Jansons (1996-04)
- Manfred Honeck (2008- )

But this past year has been a troubling one for the orchestra. The musicians went on strike for 55 days and eventually settled for a pay cut of 7.5%. The good news is that they settled on a 5-year contract, and by the end of that term their base pay should be back to where it was before the strike.

Under Manfred Honeck, the PSO has attracted widespread attention for the quality of its playing and the charisma of its conductor. An ongoing series of CDs for Reference Recordings is helping to spread the word. This newest CD, which is devoted to the music of Richard Strauss, also shows Honeck's interest in creating symphonic suites from great operas. He has already created and recorded suites from Janáček's *Jenufa* ([RR FR-710SACD](#)) and from Dvořák's *Rusalka* ([RR FR-720SACD](#)). In each case, Honeck has selected the excerpts to be included in the suite, and composer Tomáš Ille has done the work of putting them together with appropriate cuts and transitions.



RICHARD STRAUSS: *Elektra*: Orchestral Suite (conceptualized by Manfred Honeck and realized by Tomáš Ille). *Der Rosenkavalier*: Orchestral Suite arranged by Artur Rodzinski. Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck. Reference Recordings FR-722SACD. Total Time: 58:33.

In his notes for this new CD, Honeck tells us that he played in the Vienna State Opera Orchestra for Claudio Abbado's legendary performances of Strauss' *Elektra* in the 1980s. That experience gave him a realization of just how original and complex this score was, and also of how important the orchestra was to the success of the opera: "it is the orchestra that plays the leading role."

About 34 minutes long, the *Elektra* Suite touches on all the high points of the opera. Honeck conducts it with fire and authority, and the musicians respond appropriately; this is exciting music-making. I do, however, wonder whether the music inspires consistently compelling listening minus the voices and stage pictures. Although *Elektra* has a few good tunes, they alone do not make for

an engrossing suite. Not to mention that much of the music is deliberately ugly and unsettling, as the libretto requires.

By contrast, the suite conductor Artur Rodzinski compiled from *Der Rosenkavalier* works splendidly. Most people know the big tunes by now and love the waltz rhythms. The orchestral version of the glorious trio from the end of the opera, although infinitely better with voices, is a wonder to behold even without them, and its climax is one of the supreme moments in the classical music repertoire.

Although I did enjoy hearing orchestral excerpts from *Elektra* so well played and conducted, I doubt that this new suite will be programmed for performance by many other orchestras and conductors. Why? It is very difficult to play well; the music would likely be unfamiliar to many audiences; and the piece does not stand on its own, apart from the opera.

The *Der Rosenkavalier* suite, on the other hand, is always welcome and Honeck and the PSO have done it proud. Dirk Sobotka and Mark Donahue from Soundmirror have given the performances glorious recorded sound. Incidentally, I notice that Noah Bendix-Balgley is listed as “Guest Concertmaster”; in fact, he was the PSO’s permanent concertmaster until he accepted an appointment to the same position with the Berlin Philharmonic. It appears that he returned to Pittsburg to take part in this recording in May 2016, as the leader of his “old” team. Good for him.

Incidentally, Pittsburg, an easy 5-hour drive (510km) from Toronto, is well worth a visit! Enjoy a performance by the PSO in Heinz Hall, some fine dining, and explore a city rich in tradition and

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### **Paul E. Robinson**

Over the course of his career, Paul Evans Robinson has acquired a formidable reputation as broadcaster, author, conductor, and teacher. He has communicated the joy of music to more than a generation of musicians and music lovers in Canada and elsewhere.

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