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REVIEWS

Pittsburgh Symphony Honors Honeck's 10th Season with Haydn's *The Creation*

December 7, 2017 | By [George Loomis](#), *Musical America*

PITTSBURGH—Manfred Honeck [pictured] put his ambitions as an opera conductor on hold when he departed as music director of Staatsoper Stuttgart in 2011 to focus on the Pittsburgh Symphony. Yet he has overseen events not so far removed from opera by performing staged versions of major choral works with the orchestra. Last weekend in Heinz Hall Haydn's *The Creation* (or *Die Schöpfung*, as it might have been billed, given Honeck's preference for the original German text) received three performances in a spirited and inventive "theatrical realization."

Had events gone according to plan, *The Creation* would have been seen a year ago, but it fell victim to a strike by the orchestra resulting in a 55-day work stoppage during the fall of 2016. Time since then was devoted in part to a healing process that took an especially salutary turn with a European festival tour last summer, which included appearances at the Salzburg and Lucerne festivals and the BBC Proms. During the current season the orchestra celebrates Honeck's tenth as its music director, with *The Creation* constituting one of several events sprinkled throughout the season to mark the occasion.

In an interview before the first, December 1, performance, Honeck stressed the importance of finding contemporary resonance in the choral works he conducts, just as one might speak of modern productions of opera. As with prior stagings of *Messiah* and *The St. John Passion*, the director was Sam Helfrich, whose opera productions have been seen in many American venues. Perhaps stimulated by efforts of religious fundamentalists to teach the Biblical account of creation alongside evolutionary theory, Helfrich set the oratorio in a school room. The idea made sense. Whatever one thinks about teaching the Bible's version of creation, exposing students to Haydn's miraculous work can only broaden their horizons.

With the help of video designs by Greg Emetaz, Helfrich complemented Haydn's words and music with an absorbing and often delightful visual analogue. At the start, added tension infused the opening orchestral depiction of chaos as the "students"—16 choristers drawn from the 120 voices of the excellent Mendelssohn Choir Pittsburgh, which, en masse, also participated in the choruses—took a pop quiz on the subject of "where we came from."

Emetaz's projections ran the gamut from old master paintings to astronomical designs to videos of modern life. In one extreme example, during the soprano aria "Auf starkem Fittiche," which mentions species of birds, we witnessed the birth of a baby chick in a sequence that led to the workings of poultry processing plant. For the most part, the visual dimension built on Baron van Swieten's words the way a good preacher extrapolates from a Biblical text. It worked because it caught the spirit of the oratorio's felicitous blend of sophistication and naivety.



Alexander Elliott and Rachel Gilmore as Adam and Eve

The excellent soloists included coloratura soprano Rachel Gilmore, who was captivating even if a fuller sound might have better suited some of her music, and the rising baritone Alexander Elliott; both emerged from among the "students," and they went on to portray Adam and Eve as an initially nervous, middle-class bridal couple in the oratorio's final section. Werner Güra, one of Germany's finest lyric tenors and in optimal form, took the part of the schoolmaster.

Honeck led a fleet performance in the modern Haydn style, with crisp attacks and clear textures. He also maintained an exemplary degree of precision over his diverse forces. One doesn't normally think of *The Creation* as a work to showcase an orchestra, but it includes many delectable instrumental solos, all of which were excellently done.

Other events honoring the conductor's tenth season include three world premieres, by James MacMillan, the Israeli composer Boris Pigovat, and Reza Vali, an Iranian-born composer on the faculty of Carnegie Mellon's School of Music. In addition, the orchestra will give the world premiere of Jennifer Higdon's Tuba Concerto in March. Nearly every subscription program led by Honeck includes a work he is conducting with the orchestra for the first time.

The recent European tour was facilitated by a special endowment for international tours. Indeed, during Honeck's tenure the orchestra has perhaps had a higher profile abroad than in the United States. It has not appeared in New York since 2010, when it first performed there under its then new music director. A return visit, however, is in the offing for next season.

The orchestra, well known for its history of famous conductors, among them Fritz Reiner, Lorin Maazel, and Mariss Jansons, has made notable strides under Honeck, who was prominently mentioned during the New York Philharmonic's recent search for a music director. It was announced last week that he will conduct three concerts of Viennese waltzes in January at La Scala, replacing Zubin Mehta due to shoulder surgery. Now he is talked about as a successor to Michael Tilson Thomas at the San Francisco Symphony. Yet just as he let it be known he wasn't interested when New York was a possibility, a move to the West Coast looks unlikely. "I do love it here," he said before conducting *The Creation*.

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