

# Standard CSO program takes on new vitality under Honeck

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Conductor Manfred Honeck. (IMG Artists)

DECEMBER 12, 2014, 10:21 AM

**Y**ou could hardly have imagined a more textbook example of standard symphonic repertory than the program that brought Manfred Honeck back to the podium roster of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Thursday night at Symphony Center.

But an assemblage of German and Austrian staples that could well have resulted in a dull and predictable concert spoke to the listener with new vitality, such were the fresh and revealing insights the Austrian guest conductor brought to most of the music.

This wasn't surprising, since the Pittsburgh Symphony music director has been proving his knack for enlivening

the tried-and-true ever since his CSO debut a dozen years ago. There were times on Thursday when the biting exuberance of Honeck's music-making threatened to send the performance careening off the tracks. But, overall, the musical yield offset occasional lapses of precision and polished execution from an orchestra missing several key principal players.

Certainly that was the case with the curtain raiser, Haydn's Symphony No. 93 in D major, and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the closing work on the weekend subscription concerts.

For the Haydn and the other two works heard on Thursday, Honeck seated the orchestra players according to the traditional classical plan: violins divided across the podium, cellos and basses to the left. He also reduced his forces to the size and transparency of a late-18th century chamber orchestra, all the better to facilitate crisp instrumental byplay.

Honeck made brisk tempos, hair-trigger attacks, finely tapered phrases and springy rhythms the driving forces of this infectiously spirited reading. The dialogues between the first and second violins, and among the woodwinds, were as graciously articulated as the famous bassoon joke in the slow movement was rudely funny. Not for a while have I heard the CSO bring so much character to a Haydn symphony.

The conductor's way of digging beneath the familiar gestures of the Beethoven Seventh to uncover dormant musical truths also lifted his reading out of the ordinary.

Honeck's downbeats did not always produce precise chording, as the opening of the symphony revealed. Nor was the woodwind playing as uniformly strong as usual, given the absence of so many first-chair principals. The recent departure of former principal flute Mathieu Dufour and, principal oboe Eugene Izotov's taking a leave of absence next season (he was out sick on Thursday), mean that the CSO's esteemed woodwind choir will take on a significantly different character next season.

As for now, Thursday's Beethoven symphony took on an implacable kinetic drive, a tremendous rhythmic energy that summoned the best from Honeck while putting each musician at full alert – you could see them adjusting instantly to Honeck's split-second commands. Beethoven distills rhythm to its purest essence in this music, and Thursday's performance gave that music back to the audience with all its Beethovenian life-force intact.

Richard Strauss' "Don Juan" took less kindly to the conductor's excitable application of speed and energy. Honeck launched into the tone poem at full throttle, brasses scrambling to keep pace with his baton, and this set the overall tone for a flexibly paced but overly aggressive reading. The serial seducer as depicted here was very much a rapacious rake, but Don Juan's noble rank had to be guessed at.

*The program will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$33-\$249; 312-294-3000, [cso.org](http://cso.org).*

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