

TOSCANINI FROM FRANCE

BRAHMS: The Four Symphonies; Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80; Tragic Overture, Op. 81. French RCA GM-43664 (4-record set) \$31.92.

CHERUBINI: Requiem in C Minor (with the Robert Shaw Chorale); Symphony in D; Overtures to Medea, Ali Baba, Anacreon. French RCA VL-42949 \$15.96.

ROSSINI: Overtures: The Barber of Seville, La Cenerentola, Il Signor Bruschino, La Gazza ladra, Semiramide; William Tell. William Tell: "Passo a sei." French RCA GM-43556, \$7.98

WAGNER: Gotterdammerung: Prologue, Brunnhilde's Immolation, Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music (with Helen Traubel soprano, Lauritz Melchior, tenor). Lohengrin: Preludes to Act I and Act III. Siegfried: Forest Murmurs. Die Meistersinger: Preludes to Act I and Act III. Die Walkure: Act I, Scene 3 (with Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel), Ride of the Valkyries. Tristan and Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod. Parsifal: Prelude and Good Friday Spell. "Siegfried Idyll." "A Faust Overture." French RCA GM-43404 (4-record set), \$31.92.

TOSCANINI CONDUCTS FRENCH MUSIC OF THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3 in C, Op. 78; Danse Macabre. Bizet: Carmen Suite No. 1. Franck: Psyche: No. 4, Psyche and Eros. Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice. Ravel: Daphnis et Chloe: Suite No. 2. Debussy: La Mer, Ibéria. French RCA VL-42950 (3-record set), \$32.94

All items feature the NBC Symphony conducted by Arturo Toscanini and all are distributed by HARMONIA MUNDI USA, 2351 WESTWOOD BLVD., LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90064.

The phonograph has produced its strange curiosities, but none is more outrageous than the many sonic swindles and perversions that -- in the name of "improvement" -- have been directed against the recordings of Arturo Toscanini. The addition of reverberation, electronic stereo, high-frequency emphasis, and phase imbalance has often made it impossible to get a clear idea of the kind of sonority the conductor favored--a sonority characterized by a firm but not too heavy bass, luminous strings, restrained yet slightly coarse brass, and exceptional transparency. To so distort the work of any conductor is gross fraud, but when this distortion is imposed on the legacy of the man who may well be the most commanding maestro the world has ever seen, it becomes tantamount to "improving" a Rembrandt by brightening its colors. Little wonder Toscanini's reputation has suffered in recent years; in addition to many of his finest recordings no longer being available, those that remain in print are sometimes marred by an electronic manipulation so extreme it produces the aural equivalent of what one sees in an amusement park mirror.

The latest batch of Toscanini reissues comes from France and, in many respects, is a microcosm of how the Toscanini recordings have been dealt with during the past quarter of a century. Some are sonically excellent, others dreadful; some provide needless duplication of material available domestically; others fill a void in the Toscanini discography.

The most disappointing item in the group is a four-disc set devoted to most of Toscanini's NBC-Wagner recordings, recordings that far more than many of the conductor's studio efforts represent him at his best. But that best is masked in these French RCA transfers, which (though not so labeled) have been produced in phony stereo that thins out the overall sound, transmogrifying the weight and richness Toscanini generated into something harsh and metallic. All of these performances sound less strident and far more musical in a four-disc German RCA set (AT-400). Also disappointing is the single French disc devoted to Rossini. Although not "stereoized," it has been given marked high-frequency emphasis again causing a tinny, unmusical acoustic. Everything on this French disc can be heard to much better advantage on two domestic Victrola reissues (VIC 1248 and 1272), both, at this writing, listed in Schwann II.

The album devoted to Brahms proves considerably better, but offers no improvement over the four-record domestic Victrola edition (VIC-6400), which if not quite so fine sonically as the original RCA releases of the early fifties, suffers only from a slight loss of focus caused by what seems to be the addition of slight reverberation and boost in the lower mid-range. None of these Brahms performances, let it be added, reveal all that Toscanini could achieve in this music. The First Symphony is not nearly so well-controlled a reading as the one he recorded in 1941 (reissued on LP only in Japan as part of a now-out-of-print 100-disc set), and both recordings suggest little of the white heat the conductor generated in concert performances of 1940 and 1943. Similarly, the recording of the Third Symphony, despite its revelation of many frequently lost details, preserves a ponderous, often shapeless reading, one that is no match for the greater tautness in Toscanini concert performances of 1938, 1941, 1942 and 1948. And concert performances given in 1938 of the Second Symphony and in 1943 of the Fourth reveal far more than do these studio products the drama, haunting tenderness, and controlled flexibility Toscanini brought to Brahms. Also the conductor's 1952 Brahms cycle with the Philharmonia Orchestra (reasonably well-produced in Cetra LO-511, four discs) often surpasses the Maestro's studio efforts: its First Symphony (despite sloppy trombones) has greater intensity, and its Second and Fourth boast greater animation and rhythmic suppleness. What is more, the Philharmonia Third remains one of the great Toscanini performances of the score--a reading whose drive, tension, rhythmic control, and sheer raw force produce a far tauter, better shaped account than the one Toscanini recorded for RCA.

The two remaining French sets are more valuable. The one devoted to French music restores to circulation many recordings that have been unavailable for some time. Of the seven works it features, only the Ravel Daphnis et Chloe Suite No. 2 is currently to be found in Schwann II, and all of the other items have been dropped from the German RCA catalogue. The prize of this set is the Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3, a fluid yet controlled reading that underscores the work's gallic classicism. Certainly no other conductor I can recall managed, as Toscanini manages, to give the explosion of the finale its due while preventing it from becoming an anti-climax that weakens the fugue and coda that follow. Debussy's La Mer and Ibéria typify in their transparency Toscanini's exceptional ear for balance, but both are a mite too clinical, too studied and tight-fisted, without the flow and atmosphere that can be heard in the NBC concert of February 14, 1953, a concert (including a L'après-midi d'un faune) recently issued in its entirety in Italy by Fonit Cetra (DOC-17) and distributed in this country by International Book & Record. The Franck Psyché et Eros has remarkable delicacy and the Orchestral Suite No. 1 from Bizet's Carmen (in a Toscanini arrangement) reveals how the conductor, with an awesome simplicity, could lend a noble dignity to music that has been played to death. And Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice, in a much better controlled, more expansive reading than the one Toscanini recorded in 1929 with the New York Philharmonic, is rendered with the same dramatic vigor and clarity that he brought to Beethoven.

Sonically, however, this set could have been better. Free of fake stereo, it nonetheless suffers from an equalization that tips things too much toward the treble, falsifying the orchestra's tone, enervating its impact, and--as a result--misrepresenting Toscanini. But until something better arrives, what is here will have to do.

The two records devoted to Cherubini proved a surprise because the specification of "stereo" on the labels led me to expect the worst. But the transfers are clearly ungimmicked mono free of any high-frequency emphasis. The Requiem and Medea Overture comprised the NBC broadcast of February 18, 1950. Both are superbly played. Indeed, Toscanini's stark, dramatic treatment of the Requiem makes clear why Hector Berlioz admired the score and serves as a reminder of how the conductor, contrary to the criticism often directed against him, championed important but unfamiliar repertory. All the other works in the set are also well-executed, but the Anacreon Overture comes nowhere near approaching the electrifying intensity of Toscanini's 1938 NBC broadcast performance. The Requiem, incidentally, remains available on a single German RCA disc (AT-147), but his French edition offers clearer, fuller, less strident sound.

What the unevenness of these French releases underscores is the need for a new Toscanini edition--one that will restore all of the conductor's studio recordings to general circulation and will do so in transfers that are free of "improvement." Many of the master tapes in the RCA vaults, especially those produced in 1953 and 1954, are paradigms of fine monaural sound. With today's improved equipment having made possible better tape-to-disc transfers than could be produced 25 years ago, the time has come for technology to be used not to veil Toscanini but to serve him and, in so doing, glorify him.

Mortimer H. Frank