

ITALIAN TOSCANINI REISSUES

BEETHOVEN: Symphonies: No. 5, in C Minor, Op. 67; No. 7, in A, Op. 92.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian, RCA VL 46001.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 9, in D Minor, Op. 125 ("Choral").

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini (with Robert Shaw Chorale and soloists) Italian RCA VL 46002.

MOZART: Symphony No. 40, in G Minor, K. 550

SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 8, in B Minor, D. 759 ("Unfinished")

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian RCA VL 46003.

RESPIGHI: Fontane di Roma; Feste Romane; Pini di Roma.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian RCA VL 46000.

ROSSINI: Overtures: Barbiere; Cenerentola; Semiramide; William Tell; Signor Bruschino; Gazza Ladra.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian RCA VL 46004.

ROSSINI: Overtures: Italiana in Algeri; Assiedo di Corinto.

VERDI: Overtures: Forza del destino; Luisa Miller; Vespri Siciliani.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian VL 46006.

SAINT-SAËNS: Danse macabre; SIBELIUS: Finlandia.

SMETANA: Vlatava; SUPPE: Poet and Peasant Overture

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian RCA VL 46007.

VERDI: Rigoletto, Act IV; Inno delle Nazioni; Te Deum.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. (with various choirs and soloists). Italian RCA VL 46005.

WAGNER: Parsifal: Prelude and "Good Friday Spell"; Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Italian RCA VL 46009.

WAGNER: Die Walküre: Act I, Scene 3; Ride of the Valkyries;

Siegfried: Forest Murmurs; Siegfried Idyll.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. (Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel in the Walküre). Italian RCA VL 46008.

ARTURO TOSCANINI conducts the Orchestra of La Scala (Complete Acoustical Recordings). Italian RCA VL 46024.

ARTURO TOSCANINI conducts the Hague Residentie Orchestra  
Dell'Arte DA 9007: Cherubini: Anacréon Overture; Debussy: L'Après midi d'un Faune; Dukas: L'Apprenti Sorcier; Haydn: Symphony No. 101 in D ("Clock"),

DVOŘÁK: Symphonic Variations; ROSSINI: Sonata for Strings, No. 3, in C; VIVALDI: Concerto grosso in D Minor, Op. 3, No. 11.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Dell'Arte DA 9008.

TOSCANINI IN LUZERN: 7 August 1946 Orchestra of La Scala, Milan; Arturo Toscanini, cond. Relief 811/2: Beethoven: Egmont Overture, Op. 84; Symphony No. 1 in C, Op. 21. Wagner: Lohengrin Prelude to Act III; Meistersinger Prelude to Act I; Tannhäuser Overture and Venusburg Music (Also included: Cherubini Anacréon Overture with Elite Orchestra, Luzern, and rehearsal excerpts of Tannhäuser excerpt).

DEBUSSY: Ibéria; Prelude a l'Après Midi d'un Faune; La Mer  
N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Fonit Cetra DOC 18.

WAGNER: Walküre: Ride of the Valkyres; Götterdämerrung; Siegfried's Death and Funeral March; Dawn and Siegfried's Rhine Journey. Siegfried: Forest Murmurs. Lohengrin: Preludes to Acts I and III. Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod. Siegfried Idyll. Meistersinger: Prelude to Act I. Tannhäuser: Overture and Venusburg Music.

N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini, cond. Fonit Cetra DOC 17 (3 discs).

This April 14th marked thirty years since Arturo Toscanini conducted his last public concert, and a whole audience has grown to maturity without having anything more than hearsay and a few recordings that truly sustain his reputed greatness.

For myriad reasons, the Toscanini legacy--though relatively large, quantitatively--does the incomparable Maestro scant justice. The reasons have been rehased numerous times, but to repeat the litany: Toscanini basically was anti-phonogenic; he had no patience for the restrictions then part of the process of making records, was dissatisfied with the limited dynamic range (ironically, the few items well recorded for their time, such as the 1936 N.Y. Philharmonic Beethoven Seventh, proved too much for the limited speakers and cactus needles of the day). He was loathe to make recordings and was exceedingly fussy about giving the ones

he did make his approval. It was only after the introduction of tape editing that Toscanini became more cooperative. With the knowledge that time was running out, there was a concerted effort to make up for lost time. While posterity should, of course, be grateful for this Indian Summer bounty (which to be sure, did include some supremely great performances), many of the releases demonstrate waning powers, careless technical work, and a lack of long-range vision on RCA's part. Now, with everyone from Abbado to "Zubie" given a go at standard repertory, often in multiplicity, it is an eternal black mark that the budget couldn't be stretched to allow for studio-made Toscanini versions of Beethoven's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies when the LP cycle was conceived. It is rather disheartening to see so much loving care wasted after the fact on this flawed material when a few more hours in the studio could so easily have solved many of the problems, both interpretively and mundane (such as removing the electronic buzz introduced by telephone lines in the aircheck of the Beethoven Fourth; or making the distortion in the last movement less apparent).

About fifteen years ago, the conductor's centenary spawned an active reissue program, with subsequent activity extending well into the 1970's: Japanese Victor issued all of the commercial Toscanini recordings for that company (minus the bulk of the Philadelphia Orchestra items, which nevertheless surfaced later in America); And Toscanini Editions, closely interrelated, began to surface in England, Italy, and Germany--again, the RCA commercial items. Although uneven in quality, many of these pressings and remasterings were significantly superior to even the generally improved American Victrola reissues which started to appear in 1967. Interest, alas, seems to have flagged, along with sales figures, and all of these series have since fallen into limbo.

The new RCA Italiana series of half-speed remasterings, sad to report, is yet another depressing detail in the Toscanini saga, for although the new pressings are generally fine, and the packaging attractively presented, the all-important musical message is once again compromised by dishonest pseudo-stereo tampering. Here is the whole horror story once again paraded before us: swimming echo chamber; peeking of treble; beefing up of bass (with no compensating attention given to the midrange). In fairness, some of these trickeries have become more sophisticated (if not notably more subtle), and the ear, after a while, adjusts to a point.

Some of the performances emerge less damaged than others: the 1952 Beethoven Ninth, for once, sounds passably like the untampered-with original (a bit lustreless and constricted, but basically honest and well defined). In general, the best results accrue when the original sound tended toward warmth rather than toward thin-toned harshness (the 1945 Rossini Signor Bruschino, sounds agreeably suave,

if bass heavy; but the 1951 Semiramide and 1945 Gazza Ladra and Assiedo are dreadfully hoarse and over-loaded, due to the peaking and smudging). On first hearing, the use of a volume expander in the Respighi Fini di Roma made the huge buildup of the Appian Way episode seem more effective. But a comparison with the original cruelly demonstrated how much rounder and more agreeable the un-doctored sound was, monitoring and all.

In one instance, I detected an improvement: The sound of the 1950 Mozart Symphony K. 550 opens up more detail, and if certain raggednesses of execution get revealed in the process(ing), the final effect is of a more impassioned, less flattened out interpretation. (My favorite Toscanini K. 550s are his first and last with the N.B.C. Orchestra: December 25, 1937 and March 21, 1953).

The Saint-Saëns/Smetana/Suppé/Sibelius collection is a particular horror: After the Moldau, my ears were in need of swabs because of all the gook from the ill-advised attempt to transform Studio 8H into Madison Square Garden.

It is, at the end, something of an irony to report that the best results of the Italian series may be found on the series of 1920-1921 acousticals, where a time delay and the use of good condition originals has produced a version far in advance of the unofficial dubbings issued by the now-defunct Arturo Toscanini Society.

A more significant chapter in the Toscanini story began to unfold when relaxed copyright laws in some European countries (Italy most notably) enabled the release of certain hitherto unpublished "live" material. Though these are of questionable legality in the United States (would that commercial radio stations could broadcast some of them), these "imports" have started to trickle into certain American record stores, to the delight of devoted collectors.

One bonafide gem among the off-the-line material is the superb-sounding recording of the complete Debussy broadcast of 14 February 1953. This La Mer, Toscanini's last, is more nuanced and flexible than his very brilliant, but atypically ferocious, 1950 studio recording, and if the performance of Ibéria is a trifle imprecise alongside its studio counterpart (recorded at the same sessions as the 1950 La Mer), it is also a bit more lilting and atmospheric. The best Toscanini L'Après-midi d'un Faune is the one taped, sans audience, in Carnegie Hall during the broadcast of

February 17, 1951, but this one--a bit more closely microphoned and hence, unmagical in its analytical clarity--is, nonetheless, a worthy representation of Toscanini's way with a piece he played often (but wouldn't approve for public release: a studio performance, a few days after this 1953 broadcast, exists in RCA's vaults).

Another version of the Debussy/Malarmé tone poem may be found in the Dell'Arte Hague Residentie Orchestra anthology, but the poor 1938 sound and less-than-patrician playing keeps that performance from being a serious contender (a still-earlier Faune, from a 1935 General Motors broadcast, has more documentary appeal and should be issued). But the Hague collection does have interest to the collector who finds documentation of Toscanini's legendary ability to draw enlivened playing out of even an inferior ensemble. Moreover, the scholar learns that Toscanini in 1938 was already playing the correct "wrong harmony" in the trio of Haydn's Clock Symphony although his tempos were still closer to those of the 1929 recording with the New York Philharmonic than those of any of his later (1942, 1945 and 1946-7) readings. (He also observes every repeat here--including the lengthy one in the slow movement, rarely taken by anyone). Conversely, the slower account of the Dukas resembles the 1950 recording rather than that of 1929.

Another demonstration of Toscanini as inspirational force (as opposed to the Rodzinski-Szell type of non-inspirational orchestral builder) may be heard in the concert he gave with the newly reconstituted Scala Orchestra at the 1946 Luzern Festival. The performance of Egmont on that occasion is magnificent--even darker and more expansively weighty than the great NBC account in the 1939 Beethoven cycle. The Beethoven First Symphony, on the other hand, is attractive and characteristic, but not as sunny or mercurial as Toscanini's best versions (the 1939 and 1943 NBC performances, and--despite some heaviness and ragged ensemble, the 1937 BBC recording). The Wagner, of course, suffers more than the Beethoven from the muffled sonic limitations, but even so, this Meistersinger Prelude is a beauty. The fourth side of this Swiss Relief album offers Toscanini's performance of Anacréon from the 1938 Luzern Festival short wave broadcast and a snippet of his rehearsal for the Wagner Overture and Bacchanale from Tannhäuser. As one familiar with the original source material, I can report that Relief has considerably approved its quality (though not to the degree accomplished by Dell'Arte with the Hague glass-references).

Dell'Arte also lavished some loving care on the Dvořák<sup>✓</sup> Symphonic Variations, but it is unfortunate that their copy of this 1951 broadcast was an extremely poor source, and--even with some technical work verging on black magic--the final results are nowhere comparable to the sound heard in the much better tape made in New York off FM: the strings are thin and edgy, and there is an

obtrusive low-frequency hum. The Rossini Sonata (done with a full complement of strings at this New York "premiere" in 1952) is a bit thick, and afflicted with some fuzzy distortion, but withal, quite listenable. Best of all is the 1954 Vivaldi, a more expansive and better controlled performance than Toscanini's first NBC broadcast in 1937 (his only other recorded performance of the work). There are a few questionable ritards and Victorian-baroque amplifications (Cantelli also used these in his performances of the score), but, for the time, this is remarkably "authentic" sounding Vivaldi performance-practice. Here the sound is better than that of the Toscanini Society release (and almost equal to the 45 r.p.m. Walter Toscanini pressing for his friends).

The Fonit Cetra Wagner anthology is drawn from four sources: the complete broadcast of March 7, 1953; the Meistersinger Prelude from exactly a month earlier; the Tannhauser Overture and Bacchanale from November 8, 1952, and parts of the final, April 4, 1954 broadcast (the last, alas, in inferior off-the-line mono sound). At its considerable best, this uneven set is very impressive indeed: Particularly noteworthy are the Tannhäuser (well recorded and, apart from a bit of nervous rushing by the brass at the beginning of the overture, securely performed--altogether the best Toscanini version of this excerpt, taken as performance and sound), the Siegfried Idyll (much more warmly appealing than the commercial version, taped in August 1952--although that sounded much more winning on the German pressing than it does on the RCA Italiana remastering), and the Meistersinger Prelude (this 1953 version may be a trifle scatterbrained and episodic when measured against some of the even better earlier performances, but the deep, resonantly solid sound makes it seem all the more impressive). The remaining items are inferior to those recorded by Toscanini in commercial sessions, and the sound quality of the Prelude and Liebestod is blemished by distortion and an alien drift from another station. On the whole, though, this is a worthy release.