

THE TOSCANINI COLLECTION AT WAVE HILL:

Background, Importance, Current Status

by Mortimer H. Frank

In December 1980 the Villa Pauline, Arturo Toscanini's home of sixteen years in the Riverdale section of New York City, was razed--an act of seemingly hasty, thoughtless destructiveness that caused pain and outrage in the community. Since Toscanini's death in 1957, the house had stood as a symbol, a constant reminder of the conductor's triumphs during the last phase of his career, from 1937 to 1954, when he was Director of the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Something had to be done, some monument created to replace the symbol that was no more.

Riverdale, located in the northwestern corner of the Bronx, remains one of the most desirable residential areas in New York City, a suburban oasis within an urban area. Its residents include a high proportion of professionals, many of whom were anxious to create (almost literally out of the ruins of the Villa Pauline) a permanent memorial to Toscanini. A committee of local people that included several music critics, the present author among them, quickly agreed that the place for the memorial was Wave Hill, Toscanini's residence throughout World War II.

Situated but two blocks south of the Villa Pauline on 28 rolling acres overlooking the Hudson River, Wave Hill was given to New York City in 1960 and acquired "landmark" status seven years later. Beyond its association with Toscanini, the estate has a distinguished history, having previously been the home of Mark Twain and Teddy Roosevelt. Since 1960 it has become a cultural and horticultural center. The grounds include expansive lawns, an elaborate greenhouse, a richly landscaped lily-pond, and two mansions: Wave Hill House itself on the northern tip of the property and Glyndor on the southern tip. It is at Wave Hill House that most of the center's cultural activities take place, in a large hall that once housed an extensive armor collection now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With its panoramic views, 30-foot-high ceiling, and seating capacity of 175, Armour Hall (as it is known) makes an ideal chamber-music auditorium. Interestingly, Toscanini is said to have hated this room because of armor's association with war. This dislike did not prevent him, however, from trying to buy the house after living there from 1941 to 1945 as a tenant. But the then owners were not ready to sell, so in 1945 Toscanini purchased the Villa Pauline, returning to the house he had rented from 1937 to 1941 and where he remained until his death in 1957.

After the Villa Pauline was torn down, it did not take long to conclude that Toscanini's memory would not be best served by a conventional memorial such as a plaque or sculpture. Rather, some living testimony to his achievement seemed appropriate, and a committee was formed to explore possibilities. It was immediately agreed that an archive of all his commercially released recordings should be created at Wave Hill and made available for public auditioning. But two members of the committee

wanted to go further. As they pointed out, confining the archive to those recordings would add nothing new to what was already known about the Maestro. Why not extend the archive to include material that was otherwise generally unavailable: specifically, all 231 of the broadcast concerts that Toscanini led during his seventeen seasons at NBC? The problem, of course, was how to obtain good recordings of these broadcasts. Fortunately, several were in the hands of private collectors who readily allowed their holdings to be copied.

But the only complete source of these broadcasts (aside from the Toscanini family archive, which was not available) is the series of reference recordings made by the NBC engineers. These are 16-inch transcription discs boasting a frequency and dynamic range well in advance of most commercial recordings of the period. About 1962 these discs were given by NBC to the Library of Congress. With the help of an NBC vice president, also a Riverdale resident, Wave Hill obtained permission from the Network to acquire tape copies of the reference discs stored in Washington. Thus the vision of a far more substantial archive, one that could offer unique opportunities for research and critical study, became a reality. Owing to copyright laws, the broadcast material in the Wave Hill sound archive may be heard there only, its Toscanini Collection functioning very much like a rare-book room.

The Collection was dedicated in November 1981 and opened to the public a year later. Although not as yet complete--it includes only 153 of the broadcasts--it offers the richest concentration of Toscaniniana available to the public. Unlike the Museum of Broadcasting in New York City, which also has a number of NBC concerts available for auditioning (including video cassettes of the ten NBC Symphony telecasts), the Wave Hill collection places the concerts in the aesthetic context of Toscanini's commercially released recordings and of those made by a number of his most distinguished peers, notably Artur Nikisch, Felix Weingartner, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Willem Mengelberg, Leopold Stokowski, Serge Koussevitzky, Otto Klemperer, and Guido Cantelli. This offers the general listener a frame of reference for Toscanini's achievements. In effect it provides a broad overview of the era of the virtuoso conductor and, in so doing, demonstrates how Toscanini, in his rebellion against the interpretive freedom of others, was a pivotal figure who effected a transition between the expressive liberty first espoused by Wagner and the consistency of tempo that has come to characterize what we loosely call the "modern" style of conducting.

Transition is a key word. Were one to judge Toscanini solely on the basis of his studio recordings, it would seem as if he favored a minimum of rhythmic elasticity and--as typified for example in the surviving work of Felix Weingartner--a single basic tempo rather strictly maintained throughout a movement. But Toscanini's live performances underscore the accuracy of a comment made by Samuel Antek, a violinist in the NBC Symphony and himself a conductor: "Toscanini is the freest of all conductors, but that freedom is taken so subtly, with such discretion and good taste, that one is hardly aware of its occurrence. This expressive ebb and flow within the phrase without distorting its line is one of the unique aspects of his music making." The broadcast material in the Wave Hill collection makes clear that Toscanini's style was, on the one hand, often closer to that of rhythmically flexible conductors such

as Mengelberg and Furtwängler than one might assume. But Toscanini's flexibility, on the other hand, was often tempered with a restraint and (to use Antek's word) "taste" that were rooted in the conductor's primary concern for structural integrity and dramatic logic. In short, Toscanini, possibly more than any other conductor, bridged the gap between nineteenth- and twentieth-century styles.

Perhaps one of the most important uses of the Collection is to correct a number of inaccurate generalizations about Toscanini that have, in recent years, hardened into a kind of skeptical prejudice against him. It must be remembered that what most people know of Toscanini is confined to his commercially released recordings, the majority of which was produced during the last six years of his 68-year career when he was well into his 80s and sometimes unable to summon the control he had once consistently displayed. The broader perspective provided by the Wave Hill collection makes it clear that Toscanini's NBC years were not a period of decline at the end of an illustrious career, that he did not play everything "too fast," and that he was not "always the same." Moreover, it suggests that in repertory with which Toscanini was not usually associated, particularly the music of Mozart, he could be a remarkably persuasive interpreter.

Consider, for example, two performances of Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony, one recorded commercially by Toscanini in 1945 and the other broadcast by NBC five years earlier. The former is undoubtedly rushed--Toscanini himself thought so in later years--but the latter with its considerably broader tempos has a majestic grandeur and textural clarity absent from the more familiar effort. Similarly, a Brahms Double Concerto from 1939 with Mischa Mischakoff and Frank Miller proves far more expansive and expressive than the better-known 1948 version with the same soloists released by RCA. These comparisons, let it be noted, should not lead one to assume that Toscanini was always faster in his later years: A 1945 V-J Day "Eroica," for instance, has greater breadth and repose than any of Toscanini's three earlier NBC performances; a Brahms Fourth from 1943 proves far more expansive than one from 1939; and a Mozart Fortieth from 1953 exhibits greater control and broader pacing than any of the conductor's earlier NBC readings. In fact, such variation from performance to performance was typical of him. Take, for example, the Act I Prelude to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, a work that appeared more frequently than any other on Toscanini's NBC programs but of which Toscanini left only one (1946) studio recording. The many Toscanini performances of this score already in the Wave Hill collection make clear how he constantly was changing his view of the music with respect to tempo, rubato, phrasing, and even voicing. Here is Toscanini the seeker--a side of his art concealed if not suppressed by his and RCA Victor's choices of performances for commercial release, but a side the Wave Hill collection reveals for all to hear.

Another revelation made by the NBC reference discs concerns the sound of Studio 8H, the locus of most Toscanini/NBC broadcasts and recording sessions until January 1951. Intended as a large broadcasting auditorium seating a little more than 1000, 8H, like all radio studios, was designed to be reverberation-free. As heard over AM radio and on commercially released recordings, it took on a surrealistic deadness having about as much resonance as a padded closet. But as the very first NBC

broadcast under Toscanini makes clear, the hall was not nearly so bad as it seemed. The reference discs of that broadcast (December 25, 1937) preserve a dry but clear, well-focused, and--most importantly--musical acoustic that is no worse in its overall ambience than what one might hear in Philadelphia's often-praised Academy of Music. Interesting, too, are NBC's experiments in adding electronic reverberation to some of the early broadcasts. Applied infrequently and with a tasteful restraint absent from similar additions made years later by RCA engineers to Toscanini's studio recordings, this reverberation made the NBC Symphony sound even more listenable. And comparison of the commercially released recordings derived from Toscanini's 1939 Beethoven cycle with their reference-disc counterparts reveals how the former were gross distortions of what was doubtless dry but nonetheless natural, well-focused, reasonably wide-range sound. Indeed, as heard on those reference discs, the sound of the 1939 Beethoven cycle comes far closer than one might expect to that of the last three years of NBC broadcasts, which took place in Carnegie Hall.

The reference discs also preserve performances of works for which Toscanini left no studio recording: stylish readings (for their time, at least) of works by Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi, and of Mozart's Symphony No. 29 and (with Mieczyslaw Horszowski) Mozart's B-flat Major Piano Concerto, K. 595. Then there are Mendelssohn's "Scottish" Symphony, reproduced with a presence and clarity that reveal many more subtleties than are to be heard in any of the "unofficial" releases of the performance; two tone poems by Liszt--**Orpheus** and **Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe**; Wagner's Overtures to **Rienzi** and **Der fliegende Holländer**, the former performed only once, the latter three times during Toscanini's NBC years; Brahms's **Ein deutsches Requiem** (in English), Strauss's **Ein Heldenleben**, Ravel's **Boléro**, the world premiere of Barber's Adagio for Strings, and many others, including an astonishing 1940 performance of the Franck Symphony that in its controlled, expansive power literally takes one's breath away.

Dealing with the reference discs poses problems endemic to the material. Possibly owing to the special importance of the Toscanini broadcasts, the NBC engineers usually produced several sets of discs for each concert. When several of these sources survive, it is necessary to find the best among them. But because many of these reference recordings came into private hands, one can never be sure to have found the best copy. "Best" involves finding the least-abused source: Fine as these reference discs are, their soft surfaces could not withstand the pressure exerted by the heavy pickups in use prior to the advent of the LP. Consequently, more than a half dozen playings usually produced audible wear. What is more, many have ticks, pops, and crackles resulting from less-than-ideal storage that has damaged surfaces and permitted grit to accumulate. It is actually possible in some cases to hear how time has taken its toll, for some of the discs used 23 years ago in a WRVR radio series are now far noisier than they were then.

Pitch is also an occasional problem, the speed of turntables used in tandem sometimes varying just enough to cause a very slight but discernible shift in pitch at the side breaks. Correction of this problem is, of course, easily made. And seamless, undetectable side-joints are readily accomplished with simple tape splices, as the signal was

almost always switched from one disc recorder to the other with no musical overlap between sides.

And the pitch of these discs is, itself, revealing. Played back at the proper speed, they show Toscanini to have preferred the standard American concert pitch, A=440. This should not be surprising; he had, after all, criticized the high tuning of Koussevitzky's Boston Symphony. But in many of Toscanini's commercial recordings, the RCA engineers have imposed a slight sharpening of pitch--in some cases not so slight, as with the Heifetz/Toscanini Beethoven Violin Concerto, which in one of its more recent RCA reissues is closer to E-flat than D. Obviously this contravenes the conductor's wishes, and the sharpening brightens timbre and accelerates tempo to a degree that even those without absolute pitch can notice.

And misrepresentations in the commercial recordings are not confined to pitch. In some cases the provenance of a performance is inaccurately given. Toscanini's 1954 "Italian" Symphony of Mendelssohn, for example, is claimed to come from the broadcast of February 28, 1954. But hearing that broadcast reveals the live performance to be much freer than the one released by RCA, suggesting that what RCA actually did publish comes from the dress rehearsal that preceded that performance.

As more and more material is auditioned, further discoveries will surely be made. A number of them will be detailed in **A Critical Catalogue of the Toscanini Collection at Wave Hill**, a book the present writer plans to complete when all the missing Toscanini/NBC Symphony broadcasts have been added to the collection, which should be accomplished by next summer. But even the unfinished collection already comprises a towering monument to an extraordinary musician. It makes clear Toscanini's struggles to produce a great performance by preserving many that fell short of greatness, many that Toscanini himself acknowledged as inferior. This should surprise no one: Above all else, Toscanini was human. But there was a dimension to his art that is suggested all too infrequently by his commercially released recordings. In preserving that dimension, the Toscanini Collection at Wave Hill serves his memory better than the commercial recordings alone have done.

Those who wish to audition material at Wave Hill may call for an appointment ([212] 549-3200) or write to the curator--the present writer--at Wave Hill, 675 West 252nd Street, Bronx, NY 10471. As far as possible, requests for information will also be answered.