

RECORD REVIEWS

BEETHOVEN *Symphony No.1* (25 X 1937); *Symphony No.4* (1 VI 1939); *Symphony No.6* (22 VI, 16 VII & 21/22 X 1937); *Symphony No.7* (14 VI 1935); *Overtures Leonora No.1 & Prometheus* (1 VI 1939) BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Seraphim 1C-6156

BEETHOVEN *Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3* NBCSO conducted by Arturo Toscanini. RCA RCD1-7197

BEETHOVEN *Symphonies Nos. 2 & 7* NBCSO conducted by Arturo Toscanini. RCA RCD1-7198

It is good to have Toscanini's BBCSO Beethoven recordings back in fine transfers. Toscanini seemed to have been at his happiest with this orchestra and the resultant recordings (done for the most part continuously) are an amalgam of all the qualities which go to make up the ideal Beethoven performance: great power, warmth, tenderness, lightness of touch and huge vitality. In only one respect do they fall short. Toscanini's satisfaction at the orchestra's willingness to give its all evidently induced him to overlook quite frequent minor lapses of ensemble which would have been dealt with severely in New York Philharmonic days: the opening pizzicati of the First Symphony and the strings at the start of the Sixth (and just before the storm breaks) are cases in point. But the relative lack of polish only adds to the spontaneous and immediate impact of the whole.

Interest must center, inevitably, on the unissued material. Prometheus seems to me Toscanini's finest performance--the BBCSO seems by this time (1939) to have had all the technical finesse of an orchestra long used to his demands and this, combined with the lightness and fizzing articulation of the strings (never matched in this work by the NBCSO), makes for a mercurial rendition rivalled only by Weingartner in his LPO recording. And the sound is the brightest and most natural of the lot.

And the Seventh? It dates from the year prior to the great NYPSO recording and only two weeks after Toscanini began work with the BBCSO (it comes from his fourth and last concert in the 1935 series). It adheres to the generalities already specified--less polished (the strings not quite together near the start), and yet more spontaneous in feeling than the fabled New York rendition. The opening chords are remarkably sec, but that bald assessment does not

convey their quality. Furtwängler dismissed the opening of Toscanini's poco sostenuto as the sound of champagne corks popping from the bottle. Some pop! The peculiar intensity of sound which Toscanini obtained here after just a few days with the orchestra is more aptly likened to a volcanic eruption, the vivace a laval flow. Tempi do not differ markedly from the NYPSO, but the spacious and sculpted curve of the introduction's phrasing is a marvel, the vivace marked by more flexibility at the joints, the string attack with even greater bite--and throughout the BBC woodwind (Aubrey Brain, Thurston, McDonagh, Archie Camden) shine more brightly and more characterfully than do those of any other of Toscanini's orchestras. The allegretto is again paced similarly to 1936, the burnished sound of the viola/cello entry is vintage Toscanini, the gradual build-up a nonpareil. By comparison with 1936 the A major section and the fugal episode are more evenly paced, the winds singing right out. I am a little uneasy with the trio--even less meno presto than usual with a suspicion that Ernest Hall's trumpet was a little hard pressed. But there are no reservations about this earth-shaking finale. Best ever Seventh? Not an easy question to answer when the NYPSO has both power and incomparable polish; but this one does have that extra frisson of a live performance and, as ever with these BBC performances, that unique spontaneity--Beethoven recreated whole before one's very ears.

Keith Hardwick has done a fine job with the Seventh, though I cannot understand why the level of the opening chord could not have been raised to match those which follow. Generally the sound of this live concert has a range, if not quite the detail, comparable with the "studio" recordings (they are all Queens Hall), with rather less polish but perhaps greater presence, particularly in the timpani. I am just a mite disappointed with some of the others: there is some high frequency distortion audible particularly in the Sixth and Leonora No. 1, and I find the transfer of the Fourth on WRC SH 134 a shade more natural in sound. And Hardwick has not, any more than his predecessors, been able to cure the wavery, distant sound which opens this symphony. But these are, by and large, fuller and more impactful transfers than any hitherto. I shall, though, keep my Victor 78 pressings: the Sixth still eludes the ideal transfer of the warm, distortion-free sound which leaps from these grooves with only relatively unsophisticated equalisation.

There will almost certainly be more unissued BBC material, but only if this set sells; so do not just beg, borrow or steal--buy it!

The comparison between the BBC Beethoven First and the NBC serves as a lesson to distinguish Toscanini in his high maturity and the "old man." By 1951 the reading had become a sterner, more highly organised, less spontaneous affair (no errant pizzicati here), the extreme flexibility of the first movement somewhat ironed out, the little distensions in the andante con moto yet more subtilised or wholly suppressed. It is eminently not a matter of tempo, at any rate in this instance; indeed the menuetto in 1937 is faster than in 1951 (but slower again in the NYPSO aircheck of 1936). But it is still immensely powerful and impressive: this and the Second show the old man at his best.

As do these new RCA transfers. For once--and at last--great care has been taken not to tamper with the sources to "update" them in various fraudulent ways--although it seems that in some cases the original tapes have eluded discovery. The results, in general, are better than anything we have had before. After the dreadful disappointment of the Italian .5 series and the disastrous Japanese CD's it was time that Toscanini had some luck. As a result of the producer's tactful restraint, I can honestly say that the First and Second come as near revelations. The relative naturalness of their sound, with the brass properly tamed and integrated, compared with all that has gone before, is a matter for some rejoicing. It makes, too, for fresh evaluation of the performances. The Second has sometimes seemed to race brilliantly over the surface by comparison with some earlier Toscanini renditions, particularly the 1939 NBC, now available in fine sound from Discocorp (ATRA 3011). But apart from the winds' tendency to press ahead of the beat in the first movement's second subject, it now comes across as a tremendously powerful performance. I cannot think that anyone will ever match this finale--its vitality is overpowering, almost shocking, the warmth of the bassoon and the piercing oboe leaping from the speakers. Two cheers, then.

Why not three? Well, there's the rub. RCA has, it seems, not been able to trace its earliest tapes of these works--they have had to work from what sound to me like late '50's sources. In the case of the Seventh (always, with the Fifth, the least satisfactory in both performance and recording of the latterday nine), this has meant accepting a phase distortion rather like--if not as bad as--the peculiar sounds of the Japanese CD's; and this defect invades also the introduction to the Second.

The lack of original source material is more serious in the case of the Eroica. This is the first time for many years that RCA has chosen the 1949 recording for reissue in

preference to the broadcast of December 1953. It is a good choice, in my view: it opens more spaciouly than the later one; the funeral march has greater breadth, if not the immense depth and weight of the 1939 broadcast (available in the Franklin Mint edition, in very fine sound), and the finale is perhaps the most relaxed and satisfactory of Toscanini's performances. But the rendition here, while sounding well for the most part (there is some high frequency fluff which those with sufficiently flexible controls may eliminate), is drawn from the late '50's tapes which were used in later pressings of LM 1042, and also its UK equivalent, RCA RB 16102 (when, unlike the new CD, they were reproduced at a higher pitch to enhance the brilliance, so falsifying the performance). Those tapes had some horrendous edits, now even more clearly audible (I, 220 and 535; IV 210); more importantly, they contained a scherzo different from the early pressings of LM 1042 and early UK pressings on HMV ALP 1008, and possibly some other different material. It is too bad that work could not have been done on the original source material, not only to eliminate the edits, but to give us the 1949 recording as approved by the Maestro. Yet incidental benefits accrue even here: I have always been puzzled by the Maestro's failure to count the beats at the horn entry in the first movement recapitulation--it is almost a beat too soon. It is now revealed, with the extra clarity of CD, as yet another tape edit--it was the original producer who could not count.

We must be grateful for what we have got and the degree of care now being taken--at long, long last. There is more to come; one hopes that the standards now being set will be maintained.

Carnegie Hall was, incidentally, on the strength of these wide-spectrum transfers, an ideal venue for recording the New York subway, whose rumbling figures intermittently and quite distinctly throughout the proceedings.

--Christopher Dymant