

## RECORD REVIEWS

**MOZART:** *Symphony No. 29* in A, K. 201 (recorded September 3, 1943); *Symphony No. 38* in D, K. 504 ("Prague") (February 4, 1939); *Le nozze di Figaro*--Overture (November 8, 1947); NBC Symphony Orchestra; Arturo Toscanini, cond. RELIEF RL 841 (mono).

Even fervent admirers must concede that Toscanini was not at his best in Mozart. Indeed, the Maestro himself admitted it more than once. Late in life he said that Bruno Walter's recording of the G Minor Symphony was better than his own, and disparaged the 1945 Jupiter Symphony recording as "no good--too fast." In 1936, talking about Le nozze di Figaro (with an Italian, to be sure), he confessed ruefully that "there's something that I don't understand, that I'm not able to find, and that I miss," and went on to compare the opera unfavorably with Rossini's Il barbiere di Siviglia. (Harvey Sachs, Toscanini, New York, 1978, p. 247)

Toscanini's recordings reveal the same lack of affinity for the subtle, sometimes ambiguous nuances of feeling in Mozart's mature work. In the last three symphonies, he often drives the music along at far too rapid a pace, not only distorting the expressive character of the music but also preventing many details of melodic inflection, harmony, and scoring from making their proper effect. His canter through the Jupiter's slow movement, trivializing its depth and complexity of feeling, also prevents the NBC Symphony's well-drilled strings from articulating their 32nd-notes cleanly, let alone meaningfully. The worst case, of course, is his roughshod sprint through the sublime K. 543.

Yet in his way Toscanini was devoted to Mozart. He gave three all-Mozart programs with the NBC Symphony, prominence he otherwise accorded only to Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, and Debussy. I've traced twenty one Mozart compositions he prepared, including nine symphonies (beginning with K. 141), and counted more than one hundred Mozart performances. The works he played most often were the Haffner and G minor Symphonies, with over a dozen performances and two commercial recordings each, and he gave ten performances in New York alone (plus one recording) of the Jupiter Symphony. Besides conducting The Magic Flute complete, in Milan and Salzburg, he programmed its overture seven times more, with two recordings as the result. If Toscanini failed with Mozart, it was not for lack of trying.

I wish I could report that the recording at hand, which contains two symphonies previously issued only privately and a brand new Figaro overture, is evidence for the defense. Unfortunately, it is not. The Prague Symphony starts out impressively with a weighty, broad adagio, but (as in Toscanini's recordings of the Magic Flute overture) this is followed by a

headlong allegro in which the players manage to get through their fast-moving figurations without disaster, but with no expressive quality other than a rather grim determination. The andante, melancholy beneath the smiling surface, eludes Toscanini entirely, both smile and melancholy ignored in his brisk stroll through the score. The finale, marked presto, needs plenty of pace, which it gets, but also playing of wit and point, which is absent--Toscanini evidently finds only brilliance in this music. One is therefore not as grateful as one might be for the exposition repeats in the first and last movements. The Maestro first took up the Prague in 1918, but 21 years later the interpretation sounds superficial and, in the andante, unsettled, with some peculiar tempo shifts. He never conducted the work again.

The A Major, likewise heard in Toscanini's last venture with the score, needs grace, a light touch, and sensuous tone, and doesn't get them. Moreover, string ensemble and articulation are slovenly in the outer movements, as if from insufficient rehearsal. The Figaro overture, unexpectedly, gets the most stylish performance, similar in pace and balances to Fritz Busch's in the Glyndebourne Festival set. (According to Wolfgang Lorenz's jacket notes, this is a different performance from the one first issued on RCA Victor LM-7026, whose correct date is December 5, 1943.)

The previous issue of the symphonies, by the Arturo Toscanini Society, was transferred from off-the-air acetates marred by distortion at dynamic peaks as well as by scratches and crackle. Moreover, in the A Major there is a change of sound quality after the first few bars that suggests a join between different sources. Relief has either used the same transfers--the non-musical defects as well as the performances match exactly--or dubbed directly from the ATS discs; sharp filtering of the high frequencies masks the distortion at the cost of clarity. The overture is similarly muffled. K. 201 is incorrectly dated on the jacket, correctly on the label. All in all, then, this is not one of Relief's classier efforts.

According to Mortimer Frank, there remain unpublished broadcasts in which Toscanini's Mozart is heard to better advantage (ARSC Journal XVI:3, page 14). Perhaps these will eventually appear on Fonit Cetra or Music & Arts. But the present issue, though not a capital offense against Mozart, does little to rehabilitate Toscanini's reputation in this repertoire.

-John W.N. Francis-