
Book Reviews

Arturo Toscanini: Contemporary Recollections of the Maestro (containing reprints of Conversations with Toscanini and The Toscanini Musicians Knew, expanded and revised). By B.H. Haggin. Edited by Thomas Hathaway, Preface by Elliott W. Galkin (pp. xv, 228 + 297 including indexes). New York: Da Capo Press, 1989. \$13.95.

The quality of the late B.H. Haggin's writing reflected directly his personal qualities as a critic: honest and acutely perceptive ears, a fanatical integrity, and a rigorous exclusion of extraneous matter which would hinder communication with readers who were assumed to be intelligent, receptive and concerned with the substance of music rather than its background penumbra of historical special pleading or gossipy speculation. These were his standards; they are the ones by which he would have wished to be judged.

How does the present volume, reprinting his two major pieces of work about Toscanini, measure up to these standards? In general terms, the two very different books are the only ones of permanent value written in the English language by a professional critic with first-hand knowledge of Toscanini's work. They should therefore be available to contemporary readers so long as other writings about the conductor, whether hagiographic or revisionist in approach, continue to circulate. More than any other large-scale works by outsiders--I exclude insiders such as NBC violinist Samuel Antek whose "This was Toscanini" is uniquely valuable--Haggin's analysis dissects and synthesizes why Toscanini was exceptional, and beyond the reach of his more recent detractors with their rewritten history and opaque ears. That they should now be reprinted, for the most part sympathetically edited by Haggin's literary executor, is a notable event.

But the two books differ sharply in approach. "The Toscanini Musicians Knew" speaks mainly through the voices of players and singers who performed under Toscanini, interviewed by Haggin with their thoughts pieced together by him in continuous narrative. This edition largely duplicates the text of the second edition (1980). But, in addition to a useful index, it adds two memoirs omitted from the earlier editions, the testimonies of Milton Katims and the late Frank Miller, upon the texts of which the author and artists could not agree, for a variety of valid reasons on both sides, at the time of initial publication in 1967. Nothing unexpected emerges from Miller's recollections save his estimate of Toscanini's pre-eminence from which stemmed his reluctance to agree on the transcript of what he had said to Haggin during the remainder of his career

as lead 'cellist under other conductors. But Katims offers new insights into the unique range of Toscanini's practical musicianship and interpretative acuity, as well as his human warmth off the podium.

In this book Haggin's critical efforts were directed largely to his brief introductions to the individual memoirs and the endnotes which comment and explain where necessary. The editor's task has been limited substantially to certain updatings together with corrections of factual and Italian linguistic errors. No more was needed. The succession of portraits reflecting the Maestro's impact on those who knew him best, from the professional viewpoint, is answer enough to those now intent on demonstrating with false assumptions, distorted historical perspectives, and plain lies the alleged limitations upon Toscanini's musicianship. Earlier nonsense of like variety stimulated Haggin to record the truth about the conductor in this book before it was too late. Its continuing relevance is a reflection upon the integrity of more recent writing.

It is, however, the earlier of the two books (at least as first published) which shows Haggin at fullest stretch in the exercise of his powers. And it is also by far the more important, if controversially so, for the archivist and collector. First appearing in 1959, the earlier and major part of the book reflects, as closely as could a critic so intent on excluding the personal and the spurious, his developing appreciation of Toscanini's musical operation. This started for Haggin at the Metropolitan in 1914 and led eventually to his meetings with what he considered to be one of the two musical geniuses he encountered in his adult life (Balanchine was the other), after he himself came to the conductor's notice through the soundness of his regular reports in *The Nation*.

This soundness of approach is a critical factor in appraising Haggin's achievement. His integrity and judgment were among the values which raised him so highly in the estimation of his readers during the years at *The Nation*, the 20 or so years beginning in the late 1930s. Time and again he saw through the charade of the fashionable and the "effects mongers," and did not hesitate to expose them in fearless and deliberately chiselled prose. Toscanini too was fashionable as well as illustrious, but Haggin's writing about him was far removed from the flatulent generalities of Olin Downes and others. His description of the conductor's point to point operation was and remained unique. All of that is here in "Conversations with Toscanini," together with the fascination of the Maestro's observations on music and his contemporaries, both the deceased and the living, the latter among whom had to be noted anonymously at the time of the first edition.

Yet there are signs that Haggin was approaching his subject matter too closely for his own good as a critic. On p.116 he recounts how, in 1950, he wrote to Toscanini after the finish of the NBC's nation-wide tour and "reproached him for the terrible thing he had done to me by playing Brahms' First in place of the Fourth as had been announced" for the last concert in Philadelphia. Was Haggin's use of language here serious or that of the court jester? Only the latter could excuse it, but this could never be Haggin's role. Even if only partly serious, what right had a mere critic, who was far from being one of Toscanini's coterie of intimates, to address the most famous living musician in such language? It was not long afterwards that direct communication between them ceased. Haggin never knew the reason why, and apparently never directed his examination of possible reasons to his own behavior. Instead, outside the confines of this book, he sought to blame Toscanini's son Walter, with results that came to color his writing elsewhere.

The doubts raised here recur and are reinforced later in the book. The latter part of the 1959 edition was devoted to an examination of each of Toscanini's available recordings, preceded by a general discussion of their processing, particularly during the early 1950s when, in Toscanini's mid-eighties, RCA was at last permitted to record the conductor intensively. For the second edition in 1979, Haggin retained the discographical section and expanded on his discussion of the processing. Wisely, the outdated discographical section has been removed from the current reprint. Much of the general discussion about the early history of RCA's processing of the recordings should also have been excised. It is true that this was, in retrospect, a golden age for RCA, one of golden opportunities for the corporation which many believe, so far as Toscanini was concerned, it sadly missed. So Haggin's examination of what went wrong during Toscanini's lifetime, and whether Toscanini knew what was happening, ought to be a matter of prime importance for the historical record. The view that it was nothing of the kind requires justification.

Haggin did not have, nor claimed to have, the technical know-how to say why so many of Toscanini's recordings continued to be defective by contemporary standards, even after the recording venue moved in 1951 from Studio 8H to Carnegie Hall. Nor could Haggin be familiar, at first hand, with all the comings and goings at RCA and Riverdale which resulted in the production of remarkably varying editions of discs throughout the 1950s (and later) which sought to rectify initial failures. But he did have keen ears and a boundless purpose to see that justice was done to Toscanini's studio efforts. Possibly it was that fanatical devotion which led to Haggin's failure to retain that balance of perception which had earlier been his mark; more probably also his exclusion from the presence at, as he thought, the instance of Walter Toscanini. At all events, by the 1970s his writing on the subject displayed a mixture of incomplete detective work and personalized accusation which now reads strangely in its vehemence.

One detailed example must suffice. On p. 165 Haggin says:

"The copy of [my letter in 1955 to Victor's Administrator of Recordings, A.A. Pulley], in which I asked about the changes in the recording of Musorgsky's *Pictures*, has my notation of what he told me on the telephone: that after being informed by Walter Toscanini that his father had not approved the original tape of Musorgsky's *Pictures*, Pulley had received a letter in which Walter wrote that his father had found the sound to be 'logy and heavy' and had requested that echo-chamber resonance be added and whatever else be done that would brighten it; and that subsequently the edited tape representing what Pulley referred to as 'conferences with Gerhardt' had been approved by Toscanini. And this, it turned out, was one instance of what Pulley described as standard practice. Since Victor dealt with Toscanini through Walter, what happened was that Gerhardt told Walter what he wanted to do with the sound of a recording, which Walter then communicated to Victor as what his father wanted done, and which Victor then told Gerhardt to do. This left me certain, now (1979), that Toscanini not only had not heard and approved the falsified Musorgsky *Pictures* which Victor was told he had approved, but had approved the superb original *Pictures* that Victor was told he had not approved."

Now the first part of this is pure reportage, and there is no reason to question its accuracy. But the second part (from "Since Victor dealt with Toscanini through Walter . . .") is pure speculation and does not follow from what precedes. Nor is any reason given in the text for the initial statement of Walter Toscanini's alleged exclusive powers, as

distinct from his managerial role.

On the basis of partial knowledge, Haggin seems to have concluded here and elsewhere that Toscanini's son, together with a particular engineer, were largely responsible for what he regarded as falsifications of a number of the original tapes which were intentionally kept from Toscanini's ears. The facts permit quite different interpretations. Several engineers were working simultaneously on different tapes at the time, and no one person was responsible for all the results, good or bad. For example, the Verdi *Requiem* and some of the operas such as *Otello* and *Falstaff*, whose sound Haggin denounces as having been falsified in various ways, were worked on by the very engineer whom Haggin mistakenly believed joined RCA at a later date, and whose entrance he then believed marked a turn-around for the better!

Nor is there any reason to doubt that Walter sought to serve his father's interests to the best of his abilities. The conspiratorial element lay only in Haggin's mind. With a few well-documented exceptions, no recordings were released until Toscanini himself was satisfied with what he heard; and again Haggin can offer no evidence for his repeated assertions that Toscanini himself could not have heard and approved the "enhanced" versions of his recordings that Haggin himself so disliked. There is evidence, indeed, to the contrary. Irrespective of whether the recordings taken down in the hall were good or bad, responsibility for the sound of the records as issued lay for the most part where it should: with Toscanini, as Haggin himself admitted in the first edition (p. 159).

Haggin's attempt to set straight the record of this period, together with his animus against Walter, led him not merely into speculative misstatements but to mistakes of fact. For example, referring to Walter's attempts to set up a sound system at Toscanini's home in Riverdale which would satisfy his father, Haggin confuses Walter's efforts with a named engineer who actually set up a sound system in the Maestro's study, with the more extended efforts of Walter and RCA, who employed an NBC engineer to introduce a fully professional sound system in Toscanini's living room.

Does it all matter? Regrettably, yes. It was legitimate for Haggin to say he did not like the sound produced for various editions of Toscanini's records. But as an outsider, and as the objective critic he had always held himself out to be, it was not legitimate for him to impute improper conduct towards Toscanini by, among others, his own son on the basis of little more than speculation. Haggin's invective about the constant mauling to which Toscanini's recordings were subjected after his death, and likewise the editor's update on this saga only now in process of reversal in the CD era (Haggin survived just long enough to hear the beginnings of this) are better aimed. But this is of less historical significance; it is another story not really relevant to "Conversations with Toscanini." Again, the book would have been better, and shorter, had this material of only temporary interest been omitted.

It has been necessary to dilate on a relatively short part of this reprint of "Conversations with Toscanini" because it falls so far short of the rest; it covers vital years in the American recording industry, and the record still needs to be set straight. The history of those years between 1950 and 1957 has yet to be written. It can only be done effectively by first-hand witnesses with comprehensive technical knowledge, and their number diminishes. But for the rest, Haggin has been well served by his editor; and he remains, for all his faults, the most insightful of outsiders. He deserves to be remembered longer, and rated above, almost all of his contemporaries. *Reviewed by Christopher Dymont*