

THE TOSCANINI PHILADELPHIA RECORDINGS

SCHUBERT Symphony No. 9 in C (16 November 1941): MENDELSSOHN *Incidental Music to "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Op.21 and 61 (Overture, Intermezzo, Nocturne, Song with Chorus "You Spotted Snakes", Wedding March, Scherzo, Melodrama and Finale) (11 and 12 January 1942); BERLIOZ Romeo and Juliet, Op.17—Queen Mab Scherzo (9 February 1942); TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 6 in B minor (8 February 1942); DEBUSSY La Mer (8 and 9 February 1942), Iberia (18 November 1941); RESPIGHI Feste Romane (19 November 1941); STRAUSS Tod und Verklärung (11 January 1942): Philadelphia Orchestra with *Edwina Eustis and Florence Kirk, sopranos, and Women's Glee Club of the University of Pennsylvania (dir. Robert S. Godsall), conducted by Arturo Toscanini. RCA CRM5-1900 (Five discs, mono, \$27.98).

Those who know their Haggin will be aware that David Hall's otherwise illuminating booklet accompanying this set does not give the whole story about the non-appearance of these legendary recordings. Certainly there were, as he says, faults in the processing, as well as technical miscalculations which included, according to Walter Toscanini, Charles O'Connell's request for a reduction below the usual recording level, based on his belief that contemporary levels were giving rise to distortion. But it must also be remembered that some sides were not approved by the Maestro, and the possibility of remaking them effectively vanished after the Philadelphia ceased to record for RCA.

Nevertheless, that damage in the processing was a major contributory factor in their long-delayed publication cannot, on the evidence of this issue, be doubted. The surfaces of the original material, reasonably quiet at best, sometimes deteriorate during the course of the 78 rpm sides, and occasionally, as in the Mendelssohn Scherzo and "You Spotted Snakes", are disturbing throughout. More seriously, only the long-familiar Schubert, the sound of which is representative of the best to be heard in the issue, is virtually free of distortion. The other works in varying degrees suffer from break-up of the sound in the louder tutti passages, to a minor extent in the majority, but so seriously in Tod that proper assessment of Toscanini's achievement is hindered. In no sense is this intended as a denigration of the devoted labours of John H. Corbett and others in preparing the material, or of RCA's judgment in — after how many announcements? — at last making it available. But those expecting sonic wonders from Philadelphia will be disappointed and must be warned accordingly.

And what of Toscanini's contribution? Surprisingly, few of these performances are representative of what has been termed his earlier expansive style. Only the Schubert and Tchaikovsky — and then not consistently — are more relaxed in feeling by comparison

with their later NBC Symphony Orchestra commercially-released equivalents (for brevity referred to hereafter as "NBC"). In particular Tod is reduced in length by nearly 1 1/2 minutes, La Mer by over a minute, and some distinct oddities occur in the Mendelssohn. Could it be that the Philadelphia's potential tempted Toscanini to step up his tempi? I doubt it, for that virtuoso test, Queen Mab, is a few seconds slower than NBC. However this may be, some of the playing, chiefly among the woodwinds and horns, is certainly of an unexampled virtuosity, surpassing the NBCSO in terms of both individuality and sensitivity, while the richness and sonority of the lower strings bring moments of revelation not to be heard elsewhere. At the same time, it has to be borne in mind that the total number of Toscanini's concerts in these seasons with the Philadelphia was relatively few; and that, although he galvanised any orchestra he touched, several seasons would pass before it became completely sensitised to his demands. Furthermore, as the first bassoonist, Sol Schoenbach, recalls: "Many times we got into trouble because he thought of music as starting from beat 'one', where we thought of it as starting with the preparation for beat 'one'". Perhaps it is these factors which prevent the Philadelphians from offering the sharp contours of so many of the NBC equivalents; that and the dimness and lack of definition in the timpani at levels above forte which softens the impact of even the best among these performances. Of course, those less than wholly enamoured of Toscanini's general approach will count this a blessing. Others, however, will retain an uneasy impression that Toscanini's vision frequently has not been fully realised here.

To descend to particulars. Much has been written of the Schubert and there is little need for repetition. The second and fourth movements stand as Toscanini's most powerful and flexible accounts on published records, and the woodwinds in the Trio give him, in addition to his customary long-breathed phrasing, that consistent beauty of tone which eluded the NBC. But I am still worried by signs of unruliness in the Scherzo's strings, not evident in the underrated 1947 version (heard adequately only on RCA's original 78's). Nor am I convinced by the transition at the end of the first movement's introduction which, like the 1936 New York Philharmonic aircheck, broadens out at that point but, unlike that performance, jerks into a gallop for just twelve measures of the allegro before settling back into Toscanini's usual spacious pacing. Finally, what a pity that a too-obvious side break occurs at measure 356, so depriving us of this conductor's subtle transition into a faster tempo for the recapitulation.

The second, Mendelssohn-Berlioz disc is the least satisfactory. The NBC Mendelssohn Overture is one of the major miracles of recorded musicmaking—such finesse that the orchestra becomes, to quote Shawe-Taylor, "a spider's web all glittering in the morning sun". But, with half-a-minute slashed from the already quicksilver NBC,

the Philadelphia strings cannot emulate that infinitely detailed precision: what reaches the ear is merely an orchestra playing faster than is comfortable for it. Even rhythmic instability intrudes at measure 270 onwards, where the similar accelerando in NBC is far more smoothly accomplished. The Intermezzo is nothing less than hectic—half-a-minute off the NBC's 3 1/2 minutes! The dynamism of the hairpins and continuity of phrasing astonishing; but, although Mendelssohn was here expressing Hermia's fears, did he really want to evoke hysteria? Matters improve with the Nocturne—superb horns and magical violins on their entry at measure 27—and it is good at last to have You Spotted Snakes on a commercially-issued disc. But the Scherzo, Toscanini's perennial showpiece, suffers like the Overture; smudgy strings compared with 1947 and a clarinet who fluffs his way through the opening pages. No: the lovely Nocturne and the chance to hear the few bars of Melodrama preceding the Finale cannot compensate for this disappointment.

The Berlioz is inferior to NBC in respect of precision and clarity, rhythmic definition and lift. The recording of this band is about the dimmest of the lot. Maybe this is why that sudden fortissimo (fig. 62 in the Kalmus score) makes such a feeble impression. But the antique cymbals are, for once, caught in Toscanini's desired perspective and magical they sound.

The Pathetique will please those who find the NBC too straight-laced. Second subject material in the first movement is notably more expansive, and both here and in the finale (identical in pacing to NBC) the sonority of the Philadelphia strings tells. The 5/4 now has just the right lilt and relaxes still further for the minor episode, with delicious clarinet rubati at the end of the movement. For me, though, the losses outweigh the gains. Gone are the supreme discipline of the strings in the first and third movements (the latter also suffering from a too-hasty start), the electrifying trumpets at measures 67-71 in the first movement, the terrifying crash which opens the development, and the impact and bite of the brass and timpani in the march. And the hesitant bassoon, obliged by Toscanini to play "as written" the four notes before the first movement development, reflects too audibly the difficulties which Schoenbach (if it is he) told Haggin he had had at this point. Perhaps part of my disappointment is attributable to the recording, reasonably distortion-free but somewhat duller than the Schubert. And why the poor side-joins in the two middle movements?

La Mer, however, must take its place beside the NBC, not better but different. If Toscanini's performances of this were arguably his greatest achievement, some have nonetheless found the NBC too polished, too explicit. The Philadelphia recording, in capturing the lower strings more consistently, is from the outset more evocative, more atmospheric, and even though it is consis-

tently faster than NBC, some of the phrasing, particularly in Jeux de Vagues, is more powerfully inflected. As might be expected, the divisi 'celli in the first movement are superb; and the lower strings at the beginning of the last movement produce sounds of a black, menacing power unique in my experience. This is also his only recording in which the rising trumpet triplets on the very last page are to be clearly heard. It must be remembered, however, that Toscanini was unhappy about some of the sides of this work. While the recording is reasonably clear and vivid, some important details are lost: I waited in vain for his usual powerful pizzicati five measures after 38 (Durand ms) in Jeux de Vagues.

Iberia is less successful. The outer movements simply do not have the NBC's bite or accuracy and, being taken slightly faster, lack its lilt. Parfums, rather slower, has atmosphere and the violins now have a full upward, unmarked glissando at 39 (Durand score). But it also has some breakup of the sound, notably in that passage which always gave Toscanini trouble (see Antek, p.46), and which required a broadcast splice in the NBC. And in this passage (4 after 47 to 5 after 49) the Philadelphia strings appear to swim yet more helplessly than their NBC confrères.

The final disc contains the badly distorted Tod and the clearly recorded Feste Romane: would that the descriptions could be reversed. Although detail in the former is far less clear than the NBC, this cannot disguise the Philadelphia strings' occasional imperfect discipline. Reflective passages here are less relaxed and searching, while tutti climaxes, particularly the last triple fortes that habitually rocked whichever hall the conductor happened to be in, can scarcely be assessed fairly with this degree of damage to the masters. In any event, the hollow and distant timpani here reduce the little impact which remains.

Last but not least, the Respighi—just great. Who cares? Those who do will find a performance somewhat more intense than the NBC in a recording which, while one of the best in the box apart from one noisy side, has far less brilliance than the engineers could achieve by 1949.

Self-recommending, then, to all with an interest in Toscanini, even though in many instances his recordings of these works already in the catalogue are more satisfactory as regards both sound and performance. One day, perhaps, the necessary consents for issue of those still unreleased BBC Symphony Orchestra recordings will be forthcoming. No reservations will then be called for.

Christopher Dymant