

Reviews for IPCD 1054-2

TCHAIKOVSKY Voyevoda Overture. Symphony No. 6. Piano Concerto No. 1 • Arturo Toscanini, cond; Vladimir Horowitz (pn); NBC Orchestra (April 19, 1941) • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1054-2 (2 CDs: 2:03:05)

& Symphony No. 6: rehearsal extracts

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FANFARE MAGAZINE
October/November 2016

May 5, 2016 marked the 125th anniversary of the opening of New York's Carnegie Hall. On May 5, 7, 8, and 9, 1891, Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra performed a series of concerts. On each of the programs, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky guest conducted one of his own compositions, including the First Piano Concerto. As the 50th anniversary of these historic concerts approached, Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra performed a broadcast all-Tchaikovsky program from New York's Carnegie Hall on April 19, 1941. That entire concert, coupled with 1954 rehearsal sequences of the "Pathétique" Symphony, is featured on a new release from Immortal Performances.

The concert opens with the Overture to Tchaikovsky's 1869 opera, *The Voyevoda* (not to be confused with the composer's like-titled 1891 Symphonic Ballad). Fashioned along the conventional lines of opera overtures of the period (imagine a *Forza* Overture, but with Russian melodies), the *Voyevoda* here receives a taut and energetic performance. The first half of the concert concludes with Tchaikovsky's Sixth and final symphony, the "Pathétique" (Toscanini was 16 when this work premiered in 1893). The Complete RCA Collection includes a pair of Toscanini performances of the Tchaikovsky Sixth; a February 8, 1942 studio recording, made in the Academy of Music with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a November 24, 1947 NBC Symphony concert, broadcast from Carnegie Hall. For me, the outlier is the 1947 "Pathétique." As with any Toscanini recording, the performance is not without merit. But the 1947 broadcast, reproduced in harsh, cramped sound, lacks the contrast and inexorable ebb and flow of the earlier two.

By contrast, both the 1941 NBC and 1943 Philadelphia recordings are superb. They share many similar qualities, including glorious orchestral execution and sonorities (it's a special pleasure to hear Toscanini collaborate with Stokowski's orchestra), and a keen appreciation for the heightened, even operatic emotions expressed in this music. But there are also sufficient differences to warrant acquiring both recordings. Toscanini favors fleet tempos in the two performances, but unlike the 1947 "Pathétique" they never seem rushed. The 1941 NBC performance offers a greater exploration of the work's musical and dramatic contrasts. Here Toscanini favors slower tempos in the outer movements, serving as musical and dramatic foils to the curious 5/4 "waltz" and blazing march, both taken at a faster clip than in the 1943 Philadelphia recording. In

particular, the third movement march, played at a remarkably fast tempo and executed to razor-sharp perfection, is breathtaking. Toscanini differentiates the two *fff* statements of the march by applying a notable reduction in tempo for the first. This makes the final dash to the finish all the more exhilarating, and by extension, the concluding *Adagio lamentoso* all the more heartbreaking. The impact of this performance is further enhanced by Toscanini's genius in presenting and connecting thematic material throughout. To offer just one example, at the conclusion of the first movement's slow-tempo introduction, Tchaikovsky introduces a descending theme in the violas that returns in the central portion of the second movement and closing measures of the finale. With each appearance, Toscanini applies a unifying color and phrasing that make the relationship crystal clear, and the overarching tragedy of this great work even more apparent. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that in this 1941 performance of the "Pathétique," Toscanini brings a lifetime of experience as both an operatic and symphonic conductor to the score, producing one of the great interpretations of what is perhaps Tchaikovsky's most personal musical statement.

As in the case of the "Pathétique," the April 19, 1941 Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto with Vladimir Horowitz, Toscanini, and the NBC Symphony Orchestra stands alongside two others included in the Complete RCA Collection. A month after the April concert, the artists returned to Carnegie Hall to make a commercial recording. On April 25, 1943, again at Carnegie Hall, the artists performed the concerto as part of an NBC broadcast. All three versions are what you would expect from a collaboration between virtuosos and musicians of the highest order who also maintained a profound respect and love for the human voice. The musical, technical, and lyrical elements are all given their full and thrilling due. The studio recording is probably the least attractive of the three, with the piano reproduction lacking Horowitz's legendary color, depth, and power, so apparent in the other two performances. The recorded sound for the entire 1941 Tchaikovsky broadcast, as realized by Richard Caniell, is warm and detailed, very much on a par with studio recordings of the time (there is a bit of intrusive surface noise at the start of *Voyevoda*). Robert Woldrop's brief radio commentary after the concerto is included. For those who believe that applauding between movements of a multi-movement work demonstrates a lack of sophistication by today's concertgoers, I note that during the 1941 Tchaikovsky concert at Carnegie Hall, the audience claps after the third movement of the "Pathétique," and the first and second movements of the Piano Concerto.

As an appendix, *Immortal Performances* includes about 40 minutes of a March 18, 1954 Toscanini-NBC rehearsal of the first and concluding movements of the "Pathétique." Toscanini, a week shy of his 87th birthday, was painfully aware that his career as a conductor was reaching its conclusion. The rehearsal is a pretty dour affair, lacking the intensity and insights to be found, for example, in the rehearsals for the 1949 *Aida* telecast. Still, hearing Toscanini at this stage of his career, rehearse and conduct a work that Tchaikovsky premiered just nine days before his own death is a poignant experience. The accompanying booklet includes informative essays by Robert Matthew-Walker and Richard Caniell on the all-Tchaikovsky concert, the rehearsal, and their recording sources. Once again, *Immortal Performances* has given us a unique historic

treasure. In this case, that treasure includes a Toscanini rarity (the Voyevoda Overture), perhaps his finest account of the "Pathétique," and a hair-raising performance of the First Piano Concerto, all reproduced in excellent sound for the period. Recommended without reservation.