

T O S C A N I N I
NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
BENEFIT CONCERT

20 April 1949

Not Broadcast

BEETHOVEN: PROMETHEUS OVERTURE

SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN E FLAT, OP. 55

WAGNER: TANNHÄUSER OVERTURE

WALKÜRE - ACT I, SCENE 3

Melchior and Bampton

RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES



BONUS: Die Walküre, Act I, Scene 3 Orchestral Rehearsal Excerpt

Immortal Performances 1217-2 mono (2CDs: 154:53)

Review by Ken Meltzer

FANFARE July / August

On April 20, 1949 at New York's Carnegie Hall, the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Arturo Toscanini performed a benefit concert for the Centennial Fund of the City College of New York, in support of its war-memorial building project. The concert was not broadcast by NBC. Toscanini's son Walter recorded the program through the Carnegie Hall Recording Service. Immortal Performances (IP) presents the world premiere release of this concert recording. There are two caveats, both with regard to excerpts from Richard Wagner's opera *Die Walküre*. The April 20, 1949 concert's concluding *Ride of the Valkyries* does not seem to have been recorded. IP substitutes a performance of the work by Toscanini and the NBC SO from an December 17, 1949 broadcast. The Siegmund for the performance of *Die Walküre's* Act I, sc. iii was the Swedish tenor Set Svanholm. In his "Recording Notes," IP's Richard Caniell recalls attending this concert and finding Svanholm's assumption of Siegmund "nasal, cramped, wobbly as he progressed and completely unheroic." Svanholm had a distinguished career in various heldentenor roles. At his best, Svanholm could be both vocally and visually convincing as a Wagnerian hero. But based on the snippet of "Winterstürme" from the April 20, 1949 performance that IP includes as an appendix to this set, the CCNY benefit concert was not one of those occasions. Caniell discusses his decision to replace Svanholm's contribution with that of Lauritz Melchior from the NBC SO February 22, 1941 broadcast (on that occasion, the Sieglinde was Helen Traubel). Caniell has frequently and expertly made such editorial changes in prior recordings, especially in IP's "Heritage Series." Caniell emphasizes: "This is the first and will be the only time when I take such action in a Toscanini concert and this so music lovers could enjoy the occasion." Throughout Act I, sc. iii of *Die Walküre* (and I believe, the entire opera), Siegmund and Sieglinde never sing at the same time. That, along with Toscanini's similarity of approach in the 1941 and 1949 concerts, gave Caniell an ideal

set of circumstances to wed the two performances. He does so in his typically convincing fashion.

The repertoire for the CCNY benefit comprises works Toscanini and the NBC SO performed frequently, and are documented in RCA commercial discs. If the performances on this set do not offer any striking departures from the familiar recordings, they are nonetheless impressive. Beethoven's Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* juxtaposes a slow-tempo introduction teeming with anticipation, and the ensuing *Allegro molto con brio* that sizzles with deft, irrepressible spirit. The rendition of the "Eroica" Symphony, characteristic of Toscanini, is energetic, taut, and totally immersed in the revolutionary spirit that pervades the work. For a Toscanini "Eroica" in which the Maestro adopts a noticeably more flexible and improvisatory approach, I recommend a May 5, 1950 NBC SO tour concert from the Pasadena Civic Auditorium (issued by Immortal Performances on IPCD 1208-2). In the *Tannhäuser* Overture and *Venusberg Music*, Toscanini coaxes a gorgeous sonority from his orchestra, making his expansive approach all the more impactful and gratifying. In the concluding scene from Act I of *Die Walküre*, Melchior, a month shy of his 51st birthday, retains the magisterial form that made him the greatest heldentenor in recorded history. Rose Bampton is an ardent and rich-voiced Sieglinde. Toscanini paces the music in expert fashion, charting an inexorable course to the electrifying final bars. The riveting December 17, 1949 performance of *The Ride of the Valkyries* is satisfying in every fashion.

As a bonus, the majority of CD 2 (approximately 47 minutes) offers excerpts from Toscanini rehearsing the NBC SO in the *Walküre* Act I concluding scene. While I enthusiastically recommend the performances from the 1949 CCNY benefit concert, it is the rehearsal sequence that makes this release essential even for those who have other Toscanini recordings of the program repertoire. The rehearsal focuses on Siegmund's two major solos—"Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater" and "Winterstürme." With only the orchestra present, Toscanini assumes the role of Siegmund, singing the part with his familiar raspy, authoritative voice. While the attractiveness of Toscanini's vocal production leaves much to be desired, the meaning and lyricism he invests in Wagner's tenor part is never in doubt. It is clear the music affects Toscanini in a profound way. To hear him share that passion with his musicians is quite moving. There is only one brief outburst of the legendary Toscanini volcanic temper toward the close, when he is displeased with the brass. The remainder proceeds in a truly collaborative fashion. Many thanks to IP for giving us a seat in the theater to be part of this extraordinary moment.

The recorded sound is on the whole quite good, with ample presence, dynamic range, and color. In the Beethoven works, especially the third movement of the "Eroica," there is a hint of echo that blurs quick-tempo short notes. That issue is corrected for the Wagner pieces. IP's booklet includes Robert Carlson's insightful commentary and Richard Caniell's "Recording Notes." A most welcome addition to the Toscanini discography, enhanced by the treasurable *Die Walküre* rehearsal sequence. Recommended.

Five stars: The world premiere release of the Toscanini/NBC SO April 20, 1949 CCNY Benefit Concert