

TOSCANINI
PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

BRAHMS SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D, OP 73

16 February 1936

R. STRAUSS: DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

5 April 1936

CONCERT 22 NOVEMBER 1953

NBC Symphony Orchestra

Brahms Tragic Overture

R. STRAUSS: DON QUIXOTE, OP 35

(Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character)

Frank Miller, cello; Carlton Cooley, viola; Daniel Guilet, violin

NBC Broadcast – Carnegie Hall

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1213-2 mono (2 CDs: 144:23)

By Ken Meltzer
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Immortal Performances (IP) presents a 2-disc set featuring Arturo Toscanini conducting the music of Brahms and Richard Strauss. All of the performances are from Carnegie Hall. Two broadcast concerts with the New York Philharmonic – the Brahms Symphony No. 2 (February 16, 1936) and Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* (April 5, 1936) – are, in association with the Toscanini estate, given their premiere releases. The November 22, 1953 broadcasts of the Brahms *Tragic Overture* and Strauss *Don Quixote* are part of the 72-disc set issued in 2012, *Arturo Toscanini: The Complete RCA Collection*. Unlike the RCA issue, the IP release includes broadcast commentary and broadcast applause. I'll start with a few general observations. First, for Toscanini, both Brahms and Strauss were contemporary composers. Toscanini was 30 when Brahms died in 1897, and the Italian conductor was born just three years after Strauss. Second, those who subscribe to the notion that late in his career, Toscanini preferred fast tempos and a lack of flexibility in phrasing, will find much to ponder in this release.

As Richard Caniell explains in his Recording Notes: "Both the (1936) Brahms Second Symphony and the Strauss *Death and Transfiguration* have existed in a greatly flawed state. The Brahms was not only afflicted with surface defects (ticks, pops, groove defects), but was also incomplete. It lacked the very end of the third movement and all of the fourth; both the Brahms and the Strauss had a 30-second turnover gap of missing music which I resolved." Caniell completed the 1936 NY Philharmonic/Toscanini Brahms Second with a broadcast by the same artists from the previous year. A later performance of *Death and Transfiguration* served to fill in the recording gap. Caniell also engaged in painstaking work to remove the sonic flaws in the source material. The results for both the Brahms and Strauss are impressive. The IP restorations do not compete with the finest commercial discs of the era. Nonetheless, both the intensity of the performances and the gorgeous, superbly balanced sound Toscanini achieved with the NY Philharmonic emerge with striking presence. Broadcast commentary and audience applause add to the concert atmosphere.

For the first three movements of the 1936 Brahms Second, Toscanini adopts a relaxed and lyrical view, reveling in the composer's fetching melodies and warm instrumental sonorities.

There is both ample flexibility of phrasing, and from time to time, some lovely string portamentos. The finale, the most uninhibited among the Brahms Four Symphonies, is a joyous whirlwind of activity, culminating in a thrilling dash to the close. Toscanini's concept of the score is executed to perfection by the NY Philharmonic. The 1936 Brahms Second (as completed by PA) is typical of Toscanini's approach to this work. A comparison of the performance with three other recordings – BBC SO (1935) (Testament), Philharmonia O (1952) (Testament), and the NBC SO (1952) (RCA) – documents similar tempos, and phrasing. The portamento is less apparent in the 1952 renditions. The 1952 NBC SO adopts the broadest tempos of the group, although not remarkably so. My favorite among the four is the 1952 broadcast with the Philharmonia Orchestra, part of Toscanini's Brahms cycle at London's Royal Festival Hall. The sound is excellent, and the performance maintains a special inner tension. But it's wonderful to have the 1936 New York Philharmonic broadcast, a document of Toscanini and the NY Phil in their respective primes.

Toscanini was a marvelous advocate for Strauss's tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*. Toscanini paced each of the work's four sections to perfection, giving each its full musical and dramatic impact, without ever indulging in sensationalism or sentimentality. The final *Transfiguration* section, emerging as heartfelt, radiant expression, particularly benefits from Toscanini's sense of proportion. The 1936 broadcast with the New York Phil documents all these strengths in admirable fashion. Toscanini's 1942 RCA recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra (beautifully restored by IP) and a 1953 NBC SO broadcast (RCA) proceed along similar lines. The Philadelphia recording is the fleetest of the group.

A few words about the November 22, 1953 NBC SO broadcast items. IP's restoration of the Brahms *Tragic Overture* has more warmth and depth than the RCA version. Here, Toscanini adopts a strikingly broad and melancholy view of a work Brahms said "weeps." A year earlier, Toscanini conducted the *Tragic Overture* with the Philharmonia Orchestra. The contrast could not be greater. That stunningly intense performance, bordering on the demonic, is almost two minutes faster than the 1953 NBC broadcast (13:55 v. 12:09). As Toscanini said, from performance to performance, "I am not the same." Toscanini was dissatisfied with the 1953 broadcast performance of Strauss's *Don Quixote*. It was only after RCA's Richard Gardner produced a recording blending the broadcast with rehearsal material that Toscanini approved commercial release. While Richard Caniell has the original, unedited broadcast in his possession, he has chosen to respect Toscanini's wishes, and reissue the composite fashioned by Gardner. It's a fine performance, in clear, detailed, impactful sound. Toscanini applies a deft and elegant touch (as do cellist Frank Miller and violist Carlton Cooley as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza), embracing both the humor and nobility in the Strauss/Cervantes narrative.

IP's booklet materials include Robert Matthew-Walker and Robert Carlson's commentary on the performances, and Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. This is a release that will appeal most to Toscanini collectors, for whom the 1936 Brahms and Strauss will be a treasure. The 1953 broadcast material, also well worth hearing, broadens the potential audience. I am delighted to make the acquaintance of this set. Recommended.

Five stars: Premiere releases of 1936 broadcasts by Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic