

ARTURO TOSCANINI NBC SO • Verdi *Te Deum - Requiem*. Herva Nelli (sop); Nan Merriman (mez); William McGrath (ten); Norman Scott (bs); Collegiate Ch. Live: Carnegie Hall, 4/26/1948

Bonus: 45th Anniversary of Verdi's Death Concert - NBC SO. **String Quartet in E:** Movements III and IV. **Otello:** Ballet music. **La forza del destino:** Overture; NBC Studio 8-H, 1/27/1948

& Verdi *Aida: Nile Duet*. Leontyne Price (*Aida*); William McGrath (*Radamès*); Jacques Beaudry, cond; O de Radio-Canada

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1206-2 mono (2 CDs: 128:30)

By Ken Meltzer

Fanfare November / December 2024

With this release of the April 26, 1948 Verdi *Requiem*, a non-broadcast performance from Carnegie Hall, Immortal Performances completes its survey of all known Toscanini recordings of the work. The following are the performances and the IP catalogue numbers:

March 4, 1938, Carnegie Hall, NY: Zinka Milanov, Bruna Castagna, Charles Kullman, Nicola Moscona, Chorus of the Schola Cantorum, NBC SO (IPCD 1009-2)

May 27, 1938, Queen's Hall, London: Milanov, Kerstin Thorborg, Helge Roswaenge, Moscona, BBC Choral Society and SO (IPCD 1058-2)

November 23, 1940, Carnegie Hall: Milanov, Castagna, Jussi Björling, Moscona, Westminster Choir, NBC SO (IPCD 1073-2)

April 26, 1948, Carnegie Hall: Herva Nelli, Nan Merriman, William McGrath, Norman Scott, Collegiate Chorale, NBC SO (IPCD 1200-2, 2 discs)

June 24, 1950, La Scala, Milan: Renata Tebaldi, Cloe Elmo, Giacinto Prandelli, Cesare Siepi, Ch & O of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, (IPCD 1106-2)

January 27, 1951, Carnegie Hall, NY: Herva Nelli, Fedora Barbieri, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Cesare Siepi, Robert Shaw Chorale, NBC SO (IPCD 1140-3)

With the inclusion of this submission, I have reviewed all but one of the IP Toscanini/Verdi *Requiem* sets; the March 4, 1938 Carnegie Hall performance. I've heard that IP release as well. In my review of the January 27, 1951 Verdi *Requiem* as issued by IP (Nov/Dec 2020 *Fanfare*, 44:2), I wrote: "If pressed to rank my choices of the six

Toscanini Verdi *Requiem* recordings, I'd assign them the following order: May 27, 1938; November 23, 1940; March 4, 1938; January 27, 1951; June 24, 1950; April 26, 1948." I stand by that appraisal, with the proviso that I am offering my opinion on a sextet of performances that are all exceptional. The Verdi *Requiem* was part of Toscanini's repertoire for half century. Toscanini first led the work at Milan's La Scala Opera House on January 27, 1902, a concert commemorating the first anniversary of Verdi's passing. The January 27, 1951 Carnegie Hall performance was Toscanini's last. It was a work that meant a great deal to the Italian maestro. Toscanini immersed himself in each performance of the *Requiem*, expecting and demanding his musicians do the same. Toscanini coached his vocalists, both solo and chorus, to sing with precise, idiomatic diction, and complete dramatic commitment. His orchestras played the *Requiem* not only with precision, but with keen attention to instrumental balance and sonority, and plasticity of phrasing. The result is a body of performances that are overwhelming in their musical and dramatic force. Those both familiar with the generalizations that attend Toscanini's art, and unfamiliar with his early recordings of the *Requiem*, may be shocked by their expansive tempos. Compare, for example, the legendary November 23, 1940 Carnegie Hall performance (TT: 86:14), with the January 27, 1951 (77:15). The generous rubato found in the 1940 *Requiem* also runs counter to the view of Toscanini as a metronomic time beater. The 1951 *Requiem* is more streamlined, both in terms of tempo and phrasing flexibility. But for all the reasons I've outlined, the final Toscanini performance (and it is the most famous), too, packs tremendous emotional impact.

From an interpretive standpoint, the 1948 performance stands somewhere in between the early Toscanini recordings and the familiar 1951 *Requiem*, issued commercially by RCA. The total performance time of 81:50 falls almost exactly between the 1940 and 1951 renditions. The same is true with regard to Toscanini's rubato. While not as pronounced as the 1940 (and the 1938 performances), it is freer than the 1951. Toscanini secures marvelous performances from his NBC Symphony Orchestra, and the Collegiate Chorale, under the direction of the young Robert Shaw. The quartet of soloists lacks the star power and vocal charisma found in the other Toscanini recordings. Nonetheless, they remain assets to the performance. Herva Nelli, who appears on many of Toscanini's recordings, was a fine lirico-spinto with a secure technique, and ample Italianate temperament. Her performance on this occasion, a few moments of lapsed intonation aside, hits the musical and dramatic marks. But for purposes of discographic comparison, Nelli is measured against Zinka Milanov and Renata Tebaldi, both in their primes. Nonetheless, Herva Nelli does not let the side down. Nan Merriman was a marvelous lyric mezzo with a voice at least a few shades too small for Verdi's dramatic writing. Nonetheless, Merriman sings with security, arresting commitment, and admirable musicality. Tenor William McGrath is also a lyric voice singing music that cries out for some dramatic heft. But he, too, sings beautifully and with fervor. And how gratifying to hear real trills in the *Hostias*. Bass Norman Scott (another Toscanini favorite) has the right color and weight of voice, but none of the electricity that either Cesare Siepi, or even Nicola Moscona, brings to the music. But in the final analysis, this is a riveting performance of the Verdi *Requiem*, superbly conducted, and executed at a sufficiently high level to communicate fully the composer's vision, and Toscanini's advocacy on its behalf. The April 26, 1948 concert opens with a powerful rendition of Verdi's *Te Deum*, which Toscanini routinely programmed in his *Requiem* performances.

Although not broadcast, the April 26, 1948 *Requiem* (part of a concert to benefit the New York Infirmary Fund) was recorded. It appears that RCA, NBC, and Carnegie

Hall each made transcriptions of the performance. Music & Arts (M&A) previously issued the 1948 *Requiem*, along with the *Te Deum* performed on the same concert. Marc Mandel reviewed the M&A release in the Jan/Feb 2010 *Fanfare* (33:3). Mandel praised the performance as “a significant and important document that collectors will surely want to know.” As for the recorded sound, Mandel deemed it “full, reasonably clean, and certainly well enough balanced, though probably too dry to recommend to non-collectors.” In his *Recording Notes*, IP’s Richard Caniell praised the sonics of M&A’s release, as well as Harris Goldsmith’s liner notes. For his part, Caniell has corrected some of Herva Nelli’s pitch imperfections, as well as artificial manipulation of dynamics. It’s been a while since I’ve heard the M&A release of this *Requiem*, but IP’s new version strikes me as sonically consistent and convincing. It also has the benefit of bonus material I’ll cover in a bit.

The performance of the *Requiem* extends into a second CD. To complete the second disc, IP first offers excerpts from an NBC SO concert of January 27, 1946, commemorating the 45th anniversary of Verdi’s death. Announcer Ben Grauer’s commentary is included. The final two movements of Verdi’s String Quartet (arranged for string orchestra) and the ballet music from *Otello* (composed for a Paris staging of the opera) are both performed with spirit and taut ensemble. The Overture to *La forza del destino* receives a barn burner of a performance. It’s one of those occasions where you think there’s no possible way the orchestra can execute Toscanini’s whiplash tempos, but they do. Sad to say, the dry and cramped Studio 8-H acoustics don’t do these performances any favors. But they are nonetheless worth hearing. The set concludes with an excerpt from an October 23, 1958 Radio-Canada TV broadcast starring Leontyne Price. In that excerpt, the Aida-Radamès duet from Act III of Verdi’s *Aida*, Price is joined by William McGrath, the tenor in the 1948 Toscanini *Requiem* performance. Price, in youthful, sumptuous voice, is spectacular in every way. Aida was a role Price was born to sing; and how she sang it! McGrath of course doesn’t match Price’s vocal splendor; few did. But the tenor is both vocally and dramatically credible as Aida’s fervent, but conflicted lover, even if his Italian diction is wanting. McGrath’s lovely dynamic shading is an asset. The recorded sound for the *Aida* excerpt is quite fine.

The booklet includes commentary by Dewey Faulkner and Robert Matthew-Walker on the performances, *NY Times* critic Olin Downes’s review of the 1948 concert, Richard Caniell’s *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. While not my favorite Toscanini performance of the Verdi *Requiem*, the 1948 concert is nonetheless a powerful testament to the Italian conductor’s devotion to, and mastery of this great work. Thanks to IP for making it available in fine sound, and accompanied by some engaging bonus material. Recommended.

Five stars: An excellent release of Toscanini’s 1948 Verdi *Requiem*