

**ARTURO TOSCANINI NBC SO • Vivaldi Concerto Grosso in D, op. 3/11. Verdi *Te Deum*. Boito *Mefistofele: Prologue*. • Nicola Moscona (bs); Robert Shaw Ch; The Columbus Boy Ch; • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1200-3 mono (3 CDs: 195:33)
Live: Carnegie Hall, 3/14/1954**

& Excerpts from the March 11 and 12, 1954 rehearsals for the March 14, 1954 concert

By Ken Meltzer

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From Immortal Performances (IP), a treasurable release that comprises the complete Toscanini/NBC Symphony Orchestra March 14, 1954 concert, nationally broadcast from Carnegie Hall, as well as more than two CDs worth of rehearsals for the program. The 1953-4 season was Toscanini's last with the NBC SO, the end of an historic association that began in 1937. While it's far more likely than not that Toscanini voluntarily retired his NBC SO position, some dispute remains about whether he might have been forced out. It is certain that in the period leading up to his retirement, Toscanini was acutely aware that, in his mid-80s, he no longer had possessed the energy and faculties of years past. In his invaluable book, *Arturo Toscanini: The NBC Years* (Amadeus Press, Portland, OR, 2002), Mortimer H. Frank quotes a letter the maestro wrote in mid-1953: "I am not the same as I was. My eyes have worsened so much that I can no longer find glasses which can help me. My legs and memory fail me. I sleep little and badly and am tormented by tragic, commonplace or fearful dreams. All in all, a poor, unhappy man—and they have forced me to accept another year [1953-54] of concerts. And I, imbecile that I am, and tired of having myself bother, have given in." (p. 110) But as Toscanini also wrote to his daughter Wally: "work I must, otherwise life is unbearable." (p. 109) It should also be added that Toscanini was fearful that once he left the NBC SO, the ensemble would be disbanded, leaving his musicians in a dire situation. Mortimer H. Frank summarizes Toscanini's participation in the 1953-4 NBC SO season: "He led eleven broadcasts, some of which—considering the extreme pressures of the last season—are astonishing in their control and power. Other (sic.), however, clearly bespeak a conductor losing his grip." (p. 111) Among the latter is Toscanini's final NBC SO broadcast concert; an all-Wagner program from April 4, 1954. Toscanini, who always conducted without a score, suffered a memory lapse during the Bacchanale from *Tannhäuser*. Toscanini ultimately recovered and finished the program, but the brief episode of frailty has remained a part of the conductor's legacy.

On the other hand, the March 14, 1954 concert finds Toscanini, just 11 days shy of his 87th birthday, displaying "astonishing...control and power." The program opens with Antonio Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso in D, op. 3/11. This is the one work from the program that RCA did not release as a commercial recording. It is far from the centerpiece of this concert. The strings of the NBC SO certainly play the Vivaldi well enough, but the performance is definitely of the pre-HIP school; big-boned, and alternating the metronomic with pronounced *ritardandi*. But as there are no commercial recordings of Toscanini conducting Vivaldi, this March 14, 1954 broadcast will be of interest. With the ensuing Verdi *Te Deum*, Toscanini is decidedly on home turf; in fact, he conducted the Italian premiere on May 26, 1898. And it was a work Toscanini programmed frequently, often preceding the Verdi *Requiem*. The March 14, 1954 Verdi

Te Deum is a blazing performance. Both the Robert Shaw Chorale and NBC SO approach this score with the utmost intensity, producing a rendition spellbinding in its execution and sense of unrelenting commitment. It's an interpretation that accords full measure to the work's religious and dramatic elements. The concluding Prologue to Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele* is, if anything, even more thrilling. Toscanini was a friend of Boito's, and a tireless advocate for his music. Toscanini's storied career in the opera house is evident in a brilliantly-paced rendition of the *Mefistofele* Prologue. Favoring broad tempos, Toscanini allows the various episodes to emerge in all their dramatic force and acoustic splendor. Both the Robert Shaw Chorale and Columbus Boys Choir sing superbly, and declaim Boito's text with the utmost clarity. As *Mefistofele*, Nicola Moscona (a frequent Toscanini vocalist) is in top form. Moscona's rich and vibrant bass voice is wedded to superb, dramatically keen enunciation. The Devil's dangerous and playful sides are in full evidence. Again employing measured tempos, Toscanini sculpts the final progression with such assuredness and keen awareness of the building dramatic tension, that the glorious closing bars are electrifying. The recorded sound for the entire concert is excellent. Ben Grauer's broadcast commentary is a welcome addition.

The same level of mastery and intensity may be found in the rehearsal sequences that follow the complete broadcast on this set. For the March 11, 1954 rehearsal, Toscanini works with the NBC SO musicians on the Boito. On March 12, Toscanini rehearses all the participating musicians in the Verdi and Boito. In these rehearsals, Toscanini speaks almost exclusively in his native Italian. IP has enlisted Luciano Crivello and Harvey Sachs to provide English translations for all of Toscanini's comments. As the translations are cross-referenced with the rehearsal track nos., they are easy to follow. For the better part, Toscanini allows the musicians to perform with minimal interruption and retakes. An exception is the considerable amount of time and care Toscanini devotes to the delicate orchestral accompaniment to the children's chorus. How wonderful, too, to hear Toscanini sing *Mefistofele*'s part during the orchestra rehearsal. Toscanini's diction and expressiveness are illuminating. On occasion, Toscanini has pointed comments toward the orchestra, sometimes incorporating the maestro's legendary temper and biting humor. Some examples: "I could have been a pimp, which might be better than being an orchestra director." "Not long notes, dry! Dry! Like *Mefistofele*'s rib cage – dry!" "It's thunder on stage, not in the orchestra... Get it straight, for once. No drum roll in the orchestra, no! Onstage! Put your hands in your pockets or wherever you like." It should be mentioned that when the rehearsals were recorded, the engineers did nothing to correct volume loss when Toscanini spoke while turned away from the microphones. IP has done a fine job in correcting that issue to allow full appreciation of Toscanini's commentary. One of the things that struck me about these particular rehearsal sequences was the humor/goodwill shared by Toscanini and the NBC musicians. On several occasions, Toscanini chides the orchestra. For example, during the rehearsal of the Verdi *Te Deum*, Toscanini criticizes the musicians for "eating the notes" (i.e., not given them full value). Instead of cowering in silence, the musicians respond with laughter, in turn inspiring a hearty chuckle from Toscanini. This type of dynamic occurs on several occasions, and it always brought a smile to my face. It's clear that over the years, a powerful bond (of course, not always an easy one) was forged between Toscanini and the NBC SO. These rehearsal excerpts are a testament to that bond, in addition to a precious visit to Toscanini's workshop.

The booklet includes commentary by Robert Matthew-Walker, Richard Caniell's *Recording Notes*, and Vincent Sheean's appreciation of Toscanini that appeared in the March 1957 *High Fidelity*. I found this release quite overwhelming both in its musical and emotional content. I recommend it to you with the greatest enthusiasm.

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