

TOSCANINI NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA SUMMER CONCERTS

Arturo Toscanini, cond; NBC SO • IP 1190-2 (2 CDs: 109:31)

THOMAS Mignon: Overture. **LIADOV** *Kikimora*. **WAGNER** *Siegfried Idyll*.
PONCHIELLI *La Gioconda: Dance of the Hours*. **SIBELIUS** *Finlandia*.

26 July 1952

HÉROLD Zampa: Overture. **CATALANI** *La Wally:* Act IV Prelude. *Loreley:* *Dance of the Water Nymphs*. **BIZET** *Carmen Suite*. **HUMPERDINCK** *Hansel und Gretel:* Overture.
WEBER *Oberon:* Overture

2 August 1952

Review by Ken Meltzer
Fanfare November-December

Immortal Performances (IP) presents two concerts from the summer of 1952 by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC SO. After a NBC SO broadcast of February 17, 1951, Toscanini, suffering from a knee injury, was forced to cancel his remaining appearances for the 1950-1 season. Toscanini's doctor advised the maestro to use a stationary bike to strengthen his knee. But Toscanini overexerted himself while exercising, and suffered a minor stroke. In April of 1951, Carla, Toscanini's wife since 1897, had a heart attack. Carla Toscanini died that June 23. Toscanini lapsed into depression, and the continuation of his long and storied career was in doubt. But the 85-year-old Toscanini soon found renewed purpose and energy. Throughout the 1951-2 NBC SO season, Toscanini pursued a demanding schedule, both in concerts and recordings. Following the conclusion of the regular season, Toscanini departed New York for his annual vacation in Italy. But Toscanini returned to New York on July 8, ahead of schedule. As a result, NBC was able to program two additional broadcast concerts with Toscanini. They took place at Carnegie Hall on July 26 and August 2, 1952. Each program consisted of several brief orchestral works, many of the popular/lighter variety. Within a few days after each concert, Toscanini and the NBC SO made commercial recordings of the featured repertoire.

Both the broadcasts and commercial recordings document Toscanini and the NBC SO in top form. Arresting precision of ensemble, kinetic energy, and arresting momentum—trademarks of Toscanini's craft—are abundantly evident throughout. On a few occasions (for example, the *Allegro con fuoco* portion of the Weber *Oberon* Overture), the intensity and drive threaten to become too much of a good thing. But for the far greater part, the performances on these summer 1952 concerts are brimming with flexibility of phrasing, beauty, charm, delicacy, and humor. Those familiar with stereotypes associated with Toscanini's preferences for fast tempos may well be surprised (and gratified) by the broad approach to the Wagner *Siegfried Idyll*, and the opening portions of the Thomas Mignon Overture and Sibelius *Finlandia*, to name just a few examples. Throughout, Toscanini's attention to detail, and his ability to communicate the music's narrative/dramatic import are the work of a master conductor who devoted his life to the concert hall and opera house. And the maestro's affection for each of these hand-picked works is always abundantly clear.

As one might expect, the concert performances and contemporaneous studio recordings bear a similar interpretive profile. But the concert broadcasts have a sense of

occasion and energy that surpass the excellent studio efforts. The live performances have a frisson, concentration, and vitality that make them worth hearing, even if you already possess the official RCA commercial releases. IP's presentation of the concerts includes broadcast host Ben Grauer's commentary (he refers to the ensemble as the "NBC Summer Orchestra"), and generous amounts of audience applause. The sound of IP's restoration of the broadcasts is competitive with the studio versions. The accompanying booklet includes Robert Matthew-Walker's insightful commentary, and a lively eyewitness account by IP's Richard Caniell of the featured summer concerts. A marvelous document of a conductor who, in the late autumn of his life and career, was still capable of delivering performances that radiated beauty and youthful exuberance. Recommended.

Five stars: Arturo Toscanini and the NBC SO's marvelous 1952 summer concerts