

ARTURO TOSCANINI: NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA TRANSCONTINENTAL TOUR • Arturo Toscanini, cond; NBC SO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1208-2 mono (2 CDs: 132:33) Live: Pasadena Civic Auditorium, Pasadena 5-5-1950

ROSSINI *La Cenerentola*: Overture. **BEETHOVEN** Symphony No. 3. **SMETANA** *Ma Vlast: The Moldau*. **WAGNER** *Parsifal*: Good Friday Spell. **TCHAIKOVSKY** *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy

& **MEYERBEER** *L'étoile du nord*: Overture. Rehearsal. 11-1-1951

By

Ken Meltzer

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In the spring of 1950, the NBC Symphony Orchestra and its 83-year-old music director, Arturo Toscanini, embarked, by train, on a concert tour of the United States, spanning six weeks, 8,600 miles, 20 cities, and 21 concerts. Although none of these concerts was broadcast, several were recorded and preserved on 16" lacquers and recorded tape (15 ips). Thanks to the Toscanini Estate and Immortal Performances (IP), we are able to hear the May 5, 1950 concert that took place in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium. For several reasons, this release is a triumph, an indispensable addition to the Toscanini discography.

Violinist Samuel Antek, a violinist in the NBC SO, wrote a brilliant account of his years playing under Toscanini. *This Was Toscanini* was originally published in 1963 (The Vanguard Press, NY), and recently republished, with new contributions from Lucy Antek Johnson, as *This Was Toscanini: The Maestro, My Father, and Me* (2021, Brown Books Publishing Group, Dallas/New York). An entire chapter, *Touring With Toscanini*, is devoted to the 1950 tour. Antek describes in vivid and captivating detail Toscanini's remarkable energy and joy throughout the tour, his camaraderie with the musicians, the exceptional quality of the performances, and the audiences' fervent response. Antek recalled: "I had never seen (Toscanini) so happy, so carefree and fun-loving as he was on this trip, so deeply touched and demonstrative in his appreciation of the attention and ovations that greeted him everywhere." (p. 55) "And with Toscanini himself so relaxed, we all let go con amore; everyone played with his whole heart. The performances all along were undoubtedly the finest I ever heard our orchestra give. No wonder Toscanini was delighted and pleased as I had never seen him before." (p. 58)

A comparison of the Pasadena concert repertoire with the famous RCA commercial recordings offers striking contrasts. Immediately apparent are the longer performance times. For example, the Pasadena concert's opening Overture to Rossini's *La Cenerentola* has a performance time of 7:53. The June 8, 1945 RCA recording from Carnegie Hall is 7:28. The Pasadena performance of Smetana's *The Moldau* is 11:48, while the March 19, 1950 recording (from just a few months earlier) from Studio 8-H is 11:02. Similar contrasts may be found in the *Good Friday Spell* from Wagner's *Parsifal* (Pasadena: 11:20, Carnegie Hall, December 22, 1949: 10:33), and Tchaikovsky's *Romeo*

and *Juliet* (Pasadena: 19:42, Carnegie Hall, April 8, 1946: 18:05). But it's not just a matter of longer performance times. The Pasadena renditions also embody a liberal flexibility of phrasing, a quality more associated with Toscanini's earlier recordings. I will mention that with regard to the Pasadena performance of Beethoven's "*Eroica*," the timings are quite similar to the 1949 Carnegie Hall recording (November 8 and December 5), with the exception of the second movement *Funeral March* (Pasadena: 16:09, Carnegie Hall: 15:20). But once again, the Pasadena "*Eroica*" documents Toscanini's increased willingness to phrase with rubato. An argument can be made that many of Toscanini's NBC SO RCA recordings suffer from a rather "straightjacketed" approach. While I disagree with that contention, I don't think anyone could make the same criticism of the remarkable 1950 Pasadena concert renditions. And, consistent with Samuel Antek's recollections, the NBC SO plays marvelously for Toscanini. All of the fabled precision and intensity are present, but now with a gratifying sense of ebb and flow, and welcome moments of repose.

Toscanini admirers would celebrate the release of this 1950 Pasadena concert even if it were in no better than acceptable sound. But as it turns out, the recording surpasses what RCA achieved for Toscanini; certainly in Studio 8-H, and even in Carnegie Hall. I don't think RCA did Toscanini and the NBC SO any great service in how they documented the sonic qualities of their work. To be sure, the recordings demonstrate the precision and drive Toscanini elicited from his musicians. But they offer minimal sense of a concert hall acoustic, or, for that matter, the magical blending of the various instrumental families. If only Mercury Living Presence had been able to record Toscanini's final years of performances! To be fair to RCA, Toscanini approved these recordings. But they offer little sense of Toscanini as an orchestral colorist. And while Toscanini may not have been a Stokowski in that regard, he was an acclaimed interpreter of such composers as Debussy and Respighi, not to mention Wagner. In this context, the in-house recording of the Pasadena concert, preserved on lacquer discs, is a revelation. At last, we hear an orchestral sonority that both retains the qualities of the various instruments, and is exquisitely blended. There's also a sense of concert hall space that complements orchestral execution. This is immediately apparent with the pizzicato strings in the Rossini, and continues throughout. Also highly gratifying is the rich and detailed bass response in the recording. All told, the NBC SO sounds as fine as I've ever heard it. The audience's enthusiastic response, including their ecstatic outpouring at concert's end, is included. I would have been captivated by this recording even if the concert hadn't taken place just four miles from where I'm writing this review. But that added layer provided even more goose bumps. In any event, this is one of the finest documents of Toscanini's work with the NBC SO I've heard.

As a delectable bonus, we hear Toscanini rehearse the NBC SO in the Overture to Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera, *L'étoile du nord* (*The North Star*). Ultimately, Toscanini withdrew the work from the broadcast, substituting the Prokofiev "*Classical*" Symphony. Nonetheless, it's a pleasure to hear Toscanini and the orchestra work their way through this rarely-performed showpiece. On occasion, the legendary Toscanini fiery temperament makes its appearance. The booklet includes Robert Matthew-Walker's informative commentary, and producer Richard Caniell's *Recording Notes*. IP

has issued many releases that are essential to an understanding of Toscanini's art and legacy. This release of the 1950 Pasadena tour concert is among their finest, and is sure to be a part of my 2025 Want List. Highest Recommendation.

Five stars: Toscanini and the NBC SO's magical May 5, 1950 Pasadena Civic Auditorium concert, in superb sound

**Audiophile Audition
Toscanini in Pasadena – 5 May 1950
Immortal Performances**

ROSSINI: Sonata No. 3 in C Major for Strings [American Premiere] (20:10)

WAGNER: Good Friday Spell from *Parsifal* (12:00)

DEBUSSY: Iberia (18:51)

SOUSA: Stars and Stripes Forever (3:38)

ROSSINI: La Cenerentola Overture (8:42)

WAGNER: Forest Murmurs from *Siegfried* (9:00)

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98 (39:00)

By Dr. Gary Lemco

The passionate discipline characteristic of conductor Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) finds excellent expression in this "World Premiere Release" from Immortal Performances, documenting the 5 May 1950 concert by the Maestro and the NBC Symphony Orchestra at the Pasadena, California Civic Auditorium. Even having programmed a generally populist range of compositions, at every measure we hear, in his rehearsal of Meyerbeer's *North Star Overture*, the Maestro's constant, shouted demands for *subito*, *cantabile*, and *espressivo*, in the midst of the composer's arsenal of percussive effects from brass, tympani, and cymbals. Only the fact that Toscanini, despite his scrupulous exertions, felt the orchestra insufficiently prepared, removed the Meyerbeer rarity from his public performances, replacing it with Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*.

The concert opens with an astonishingly clear rendition of Rossini's 1817 *Overture to La Cenerentola*, a dynamic piece that forever justifies Rossini's nickname as "Monsieur Crescendo." The acoustical resonance of the Pasadena venue pales the many recordings that exist from Studio 8H in Radio City, New York – witness the sterling pizzicatos from the NBC strings – and we could wish the site had been available from the orchestra's earliest days. Those generations raised on the Toscanini performance of the Beethoven *Eroica Symphony* know how the sense of inevitability permeates every bar, the ferocity of will that drives its opening *Allegro con brio* to a resolution of its many conflicting, polyphonic impulses and the overcoming of self-imposed limitations. The

interior vibrancy of the inner string lines and brass interjections throb with an elastic energy we feel long overdue Toscanini's musical genius. A much-warranted applause erupts from the audience.

The heart of the Symphony, its ternary second movement, *Marcia funebre: Adagio assai*, C minor, Beethoven's farewell to an ill-conceived idealism, projects from the outset a grim, firm *gravitas*, both fraught with anguish yet subdued in economical, musical means. The dance-like episode curls into yet another martial explosion of emotion in G major whose cadences feel curtailed, suppressed, so that the funeral mood in all its contrapuntal glory may proceed. The remainder of the movement seems valedictory, accepting of the universality of tragedy, from which heroism may emerge.

Without delay, the swiftly moving impulses of the *Scherzo: Allegro vivace: Trio* scramble by on light feet immanence of transcendence. and then detonate into Beethoven's idiosyncratic kernels of atomic energy. At the winds' chromatic coda, yet another brief utterance of audience applause. Beethoven employs his patented, bare ground-bass rhythmic motive as the basis for the "Prometheus" theme and variations of his finale: *Allegro molto: Poco andante: Presto*: a fantasia-form that will employ two fugues in the course of its majestic, alternately militant and pastoral, evolution. Rarely have the NBC brass and battery enjoyed their punctuated utterances such full resonance of expression, and the resounding intensities simply cast the Pasadena audience into throes of exultation.

The familiar strains of Bedrich Smetana's *The Moldau* ensue, a pastoral certainly, but rife with nationalistic pageantry and heroic ambitions. The NBC strings and brass once more invest a warm passion into the progress of the river and its scenic episodes, culminating with the confluence of its stately, native theme with the High Castle's motif based on the invocations of the bard Lumir.

Toscanini proceeds to the 1879 orchestral episode from Act III of Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, the Good Friday Music, arranged as an independent concert piece. The opening depicts the anointment of Parsifal, deemed King of the Holy Grail Knights. The ineffable beauty of Nature once more prevails in this music as it had in Smetana, as the brilliance of a meadow illuminates Kundry's baptism and repentance. The vision of Gurnemanz prevails, that Good Friday waters Nature's fields with the tears of penitents, and Heaven rejoices in the Savior's redeeming sacrifice upon the cross. Toscanini creates an intimately transparent tapestry that utilizes the "Dresden Amen" adopted from the Saxon church and Mendelssohn, the whole a stunning invocation of the immanence of transcendence.

Toscanini concludes the formal concert with a performance of Tchaikovsky's 1870 *Overture-Fantasia Romeo and Juliet*, a one movement, sonata-form, tone-poem that recounts the emotional vitality of Shakespeare's play without any attempt at a chronological, scenic program. Toscanini's evolution paces itself in broad strokes,

relishing the chromatic elements, F# minor and E minor, that first set forth the narrative of the tragedy before the fateful B minor erupts in conflict. The famous love-theme in D-flat major emerges with tender restraint and luminous string tone, virtues of which the Maestro does not often receive proper credit. Does over four minutes of audience ovation count for something?

Immortal Performances provides a lavish, illustrated booklet, with informative program notes by Robert Matthew-Walker and producer Richard Caniell's historical context for the Toscanini tour, making an attractive alternative to the competition by rival label Pristine Audio, for the presentation of Toscanini's Pasadena concerts. Highly recommended.