

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS 1240

ARTURO TOSCANINI : A Chronology

- 1867 Born Parma, Italy. Father a tailor, mother sews to supplement very meagre income. Inadequate diet may have stunted growth. Learns to read - avid reader. No music in background, teaches himself to play piano - learns contemporary operas.
- 1876 Enters local music college. Becomes workaholic, every spare moment studies scores, perhaps cause of very poor eyesight. Tries conducting college orchestras.
- 1885 Graduates with highest honours in cello, piano, composition.
- 1886 Orchestral cellist, member of opera company, travels to Brazil. Local conductor inadequate - audience increasingly unruly - members of company beg, cajole him to take over - audience calms down, stunned by abilities of fiery, slight, unknown youth, conducting from memory.
- 1887 Cellist in first performance of *Otello*. Nervously asks Verdi to clarify points in cello part.
- 1892 Conducts first performance of *I Pagliacci*.
- 1895 Conducts first performance in Italy of *Die Götterdämmerung*.
- 1896 Conducts first performance of *La Bohème*.
- 1896 Conducts first orchestral concert.
- 1897 Marries (has various affairs, but never divorces; perhaps because of Catholic background).
- 1898 Musical Director La Scala, Milan.
- 1908 First Conductor Metropolitan Opera House, New York.
- 1913 First American orchestral concert.
- 1915 Returns to Italy. Performs for Italian troops. Conducts for Red Cross.
- 1920 Forms new La Scala Orchestra. Takes it on tour of North America to give it plenty of practice for re-opening of La Scala Opera House.
- 1921 Musical Director of re-opened La Scala. Mounting problems due to his refusal to comply with wishes of Fascists.
- 1926 Guest conductor of New York Philharmonic Orchestra.
- 1927 Permanent conductor of Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York (formed by merger of N.Y. Phil. and N.Y. Symph. Orchestras).
- 1930 Conducts at Bayreuth in 1931, but in 1933 refuses to return.
- 1934 Conducts in Salzburg, but in 1938 refuses to continue.
- 1935 Conducts B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, Queen's Hall, London.
- 1937 Formation of National Broadcasting Company Symphony Orchestra specifically for Toscanini.
- 1940 Toscanini, now 73, takes N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra on extensive tour of South America.

1950 Now 83, tours United States.

1954 Retires.

1957 Dies in New York home.

(Fuller accounts of Toscanini's life and conducting are in the notes to CD1189 - Toscanini conducts La Scala Orchestra, 1920-1921 and CD1230 - Toscanini conducts the "Choral" Symphony, 1939)

Toscanini very rarely permitted encores; presumably if the composers wanted encores they would write them in their scores. He never taught, though he did regard Cantelli as his successor and when Cantelli was killed in an air crash in 1957, his family tried, unsuccessfully, to hide it from him.

Toscanini is often described as an authoritarian, a dictator, a tyrant, as inflexible. He was out to play the music as the composer intended it. If rehearsals were insufficient for this to be achieved then a performance could be cancelled. Much has been made of his tantrums. These were probably far fewer than reported; in many cases grumbles, or a shout, have been elevated in the telling to tantrum-status; and some were probably staged to get the level of playing he wanted.

Much has been made of his rigid tempi. Certainly he never uses sweeping changes of tempo in the manner of Mengelberg, say, or Furtwängler, but as these performances show, tempi are in no manner rigid. Similarly, his obsession with textual accuracy is exaggerated. Certainly he did not make wholesale changes as some conductors did, but a small change to bring out a part or to correct what he thought was an oversight was permissible.

Toscanini had a vast repertoire, there are some comments about this in the notes to CD 1230. The pieces on this CD, in this concert, as the producers prefer to think of it, are what may be fairly described as "good light classical".

Toscanini, as has been indicated, had his detractors, but even the strongest of them could not deny that his performances of Rossini Overtures were superb. In *The Thieving Magpie* a servant is found guilty of the theft of a silver spoon. For this she is condemned to death. Luckily the spoon is recovered in time from the nest of a magpie. The orchestra is as much a virtuoso instrument for Toscanini as the violin for Heifetz.

Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833) was just reaching fame when he died, remarking, we are told, that he had only just begun to understand the stage. The story resembles *Don Giovanni* in that Zampa, a Corsair who has wronged a girl, is eventually brought to book by a statue. The overture is probably about the only piece by which the composer is now remembered. The dynamic range is unusually large for a recording of this time; just, just audible are the drum rolls about two minutes in.

La Gioconda has a typical complicated Italian-opera plot: banishment, disguise, denunciation to the Inquisition, a fire, a stabbing, a poisoning and so forth. At one point the crowd dances; a means of introducing the ballet scene, a necessary ingredient of

grand opera at the time.

Samuel Barber is amongst North America's most prominent 20th century composers. *Adagio for Strings* is an orchestration of the slow movement from a string quartet. Its quiet reflective nature may perhaps call to mind a certain other well known adagio.

"I hope you live in interesting times" is said to be an ancient Chinese curse. Prokofiev left Russia in 1922 but returned in 1934. He died on the same day as Stalin. In the "Classical" Symphony, as the title suggests, a "modern" 20th century composer sees as a challenge the composition of a symphony in "severely classical form". But the result is much more than pastiche. Under Toscanini the precision of phrasing and dynamics are breathtaking, and at the piquant humour we would laugh out loud, but for the risk of missing what comes next.

Johann Strauss II (1825-1899) was admired by Brahms and by Wagner. The bigger waltzes, in their form and craftsmanship, in their thematic development and orchestration could be ranked under the more austere title of Tone-Poems. *On the Blue Danube* "became", as Grove remarks, "a kind of musical watchword in Vienna, and was played on all festive occasions." The accuracy of intonation of the strings is a delight in itself.

Whatever one's views on bull fighting, cigarette factories, and fortune telling, the "big tunes" from *Carmen* given by a full symphony orchestra under a major conductor, make an undeniably exciting impact.

Mendelssohn visited Fingal's Cave in 1829, during his first visit to England. In Holyrood Palace he wrote down sixteen bars which became, in effect, the motto of his "Scottish" Symphony, and twenty bars which he wrote down "on one of the Hebrides. . . to show how extraordinarily the place affected me" come almost unchanged at the start of the Hebrides Overture, as this piece is alternatively known.

Susanna's secret is that she smokes. Gil, her husband catching the odour of tobacco, assumes he has a rival. They quarrel. He discovers the truth. There is a reconciliation but, alas, the opera ends with both of them smoking.

This Compact Disc might have been called "Toscanini at War", not in allusion to Toscanini's fiery nature, but as all of the performances, except of the piece by Barber, stem from recordings made in the United States during the war as part of a programme for entertaining the armed forces. All derive from live or broadcast concerts; a number of them from the time when the Musicians' Union ban on recording was lifted specifically for the war effort. It may well be that in this way we hear Toscanini at his very best, as he detested working within the limitations of recording studios. However there are certain drawbacks for which, it is hoped, the listener will be understanding. The engineers who made the original recordings had either to turn down the level for certain peaks or allow a degree of overload. Sometimes, too, a piece ends very abruptly as the engineers try to cut before the applause starts. Lastly, there are a few coughs, and sometimes Toscanini can be heard gently singing to himself. But few orchestras sizzle like this one.

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"I smoked my first cigarette and first kissed a girl on the same day. I never smoked again." – Arturo Toscanini