

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1441, 1442 & 1443

GREAT ORCHESTRAS of AMERICA

Of the top five orchestras in the world in 1930, three, the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra were American, and each was led by an iron-willed, charismatic, genius from Europe: Arturo Toscanini, Leopold Stokowski and Serge Koussevitzky respectively.

It is the purpose of these three albums to offer some insights into how this situation developed by means of sound recordings and written notes. To this end 1930 is fortuitously a happy choice. The electric recording process introduced in 1925 was a great improvement on the earlier acoustic process, particularly for orchestral forces, and at the same time the stranglehold of the Great Depression was not yet so tight as to prevent the recording companies from employing the greatest conductors and the finest orchestras both to enlarge their catalogues and to replace recordings made by the earlier process.

The RUSSIAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA of NEW YORK was founded by Modest Altschuler in 1904 and he conducted it until it was disbanded in 1919. As the name suggests, the aim was to promote Russian music. Works presented in America for the first time included Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina Prelude*, Scriabin's *Prométhée: Le Poème de feu* and Prokofiev's first piano concerto. Artists who made their American début with this orchestra include Josef Lhévinne (1906), Mischa Elman (1908), Sergei Rachmaninov (1909) and Serge Prokofiev (1918). Apparently, neither conductor nor orchestra was above average, but the cause of Russian music in America was served.

MODEST (Moisei Isaacovich) ALTSCHULER (Mogilev, Russia 1873-Los Angeles 1963) studied cello at the Moscow Conservatoire and travelled to the United States at the very end of the 19th century. After founding and ultimately disbanding his Russian Symphony Orchestra, Altschuler went to California where he became highly regarded as a conductor and teacher. He composed a number of film scores, most of which he conducted in the film studios. In 1926 he founded the Glendale Symphony Orchestra.

The NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA was founded in 1842. At first the audience and the music were largely German and only subscribers, their relatives and friends, and musicians were admitted. The first conductor was Ureli Corelli Hill, a violinist. In 1865 he was followed by Carl Bergmann. However, in 1876 Bergmann was dismissed for "indolence and drinking". Theodore Thomas took over, at the same time retaining control of his own orchestra. Indeed, his aim seems to have been to take over New York's musical life. However, in 1878 Leopold Damrosch, Liszt's first violin in the Weimar orchestra and already with seven years experience of New York, noting that the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was beyond his grasp, founded his own orchestra:

The NEW YORK SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. Both orchestras, unlike the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the control of Higginson (vide infra), who disliked modern music generally and Wagner in particular, were German orientated and freely played Wagner. Competition between Damrosch's New York Symphony Orchestra, and Thomas's New York Philharmonic and Thomas Orchestras was keen and persistent. Each sought the financial allegiance of the wealthiest New York families; each sought to grab as many new scores as he could and thus to give more New York premières than the other.

For the 1885/6 season Damrosch was engaged to conduct the Metropolitan Opera, however during the season he died. Anton Seidl was engaged to replace him, but his son, Walter Damrosch, aged 23, took over the New York Symphony Orchestra.

The competition was now between Anton Seidl and Theodore Thomas. Seidl won. Anton Seidl was undoubtedly much the superior of Walter Damrosch as a musician, but Damrosch had a quality lacking in Seidl: he knew how to mix with and befriend the Carnegies of this world. Thus in 1890 Carnegie became president of the New York Symphony Orchestra, and with Carnegie on the Board were J. P. Morgan, Rockefeller and three Vanderbilts. And further:

Damrosch + Carnegie = Carnegie Hall.

1891 was an annus mirabilis for Damrosch: Theodore Thomas gave up and moved to Chicago, Seidl took over the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and Tchaikovsky accepted Damrosch's invitation to be present at the opening of the Carnegie Hall.

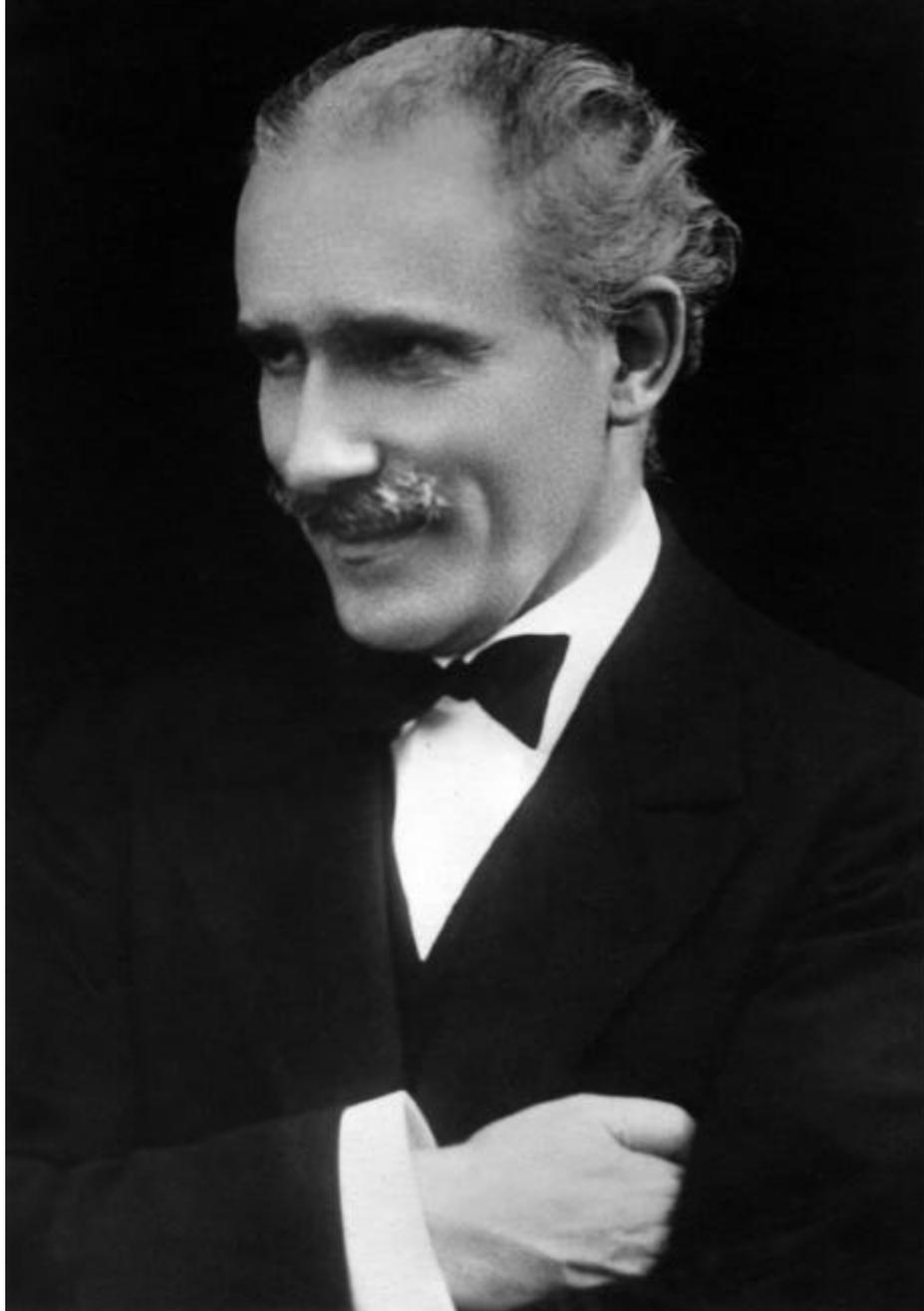
Now, whereas the Boston Symphony Orchestra was financed and controlled by Higginson, Carnegie believed that organisations might be helped to start, but should become self-sustaining. Thus, in 1909 he gave up the presidency of the New York Symphony and commenced supporting others. The Carnegie Hall, unlike the Boston Symphony Hall, did not now belong exclusively to any one orchestra.

Under Seidl the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was set fair to become an American Berlin Philharmonic, or even Vienna Philharmonic, but in 1898 Seidl had died, since when the New York Philharmonic, rudderless, had drifted.

In 1908 Mahler began a four-year contract at the Metropolitan Opera, a contract signed with Conried. However, the German Conried died and was replaced by the Italian Gatti-Casazza and Gatti-Casazza brought with him Arturo Toscanini. For all that Mahler's work was praised, he soon found himself being elbowed out, the number of performances conducted by him declining yearly. However, the much decayed New York Philharmonic was now being reorganised and was looking for a luminary to lead it. A marriage was quickly arranged and Mahler conducted the New York Philharmonic until illness necessitated his return to Vienna in 1911.

Any argument there had been over Mahler's performances at the Metropolitan Opera was overshadowed by that about his work with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. For a start Mahler, retouched scoring. (i.e. more and more obviously than others did.) And always, Mahler being Mahler, his reign deteriorated into arguments and conflicts. In New York the problem was much

aggravated by Mahler's tactlessness which was interpreted as arrogance. Of all the conductors of whom we might have had records, but don't, Mahler is probably the greatest loss. Otto Klemperer, who very much admired Toscanini, on being asked if Toscanini was as great as Mahler, replied without any hesitation, "Mahler was a hundred times greater." (There are some piano rolls, but they cannot be considered to fill the gap.)



ARTURO TOSCANINI

On Mahler's death in 1911 and after a deal of discussion Josef Stránský was chosen by the New York Philharmonic Society to succeed him.

JOSEF STRÁNSKÝ (Hupolec, Bohemia 1872-New York 1936) studied medicine in Prague, Vienna and Leipzig. He then studied music in Prague with Dvorák and Fibich, and in Vienna with Bruckner and Fuchs. He gained experience as a conductor at the Deutsches Theater in Prague and, from 1900 to 1909, at the Hamburg Opera. He conducted every concert of the New York Philharmonic

Orchestra from 1911 to 1920 and in the following season, after the merger with the National Symphony Orchestra, Willem Mengelberg conducted the first half and Stránský the second.

About this time Stránský moved from music to become an art dealer. In this second career he put together a ranking private art collection.

Stránský was probably a competent, but not a great conductor. However, in following a charismatic genius such as Mahler, he was in an unenviable position. We can believe that he was not able to maintain Mahler's standards, but some of the criticism was probably inspired by malice. A review in *Musical Leader* of November 20th, 1913 may well be fair: "Mr. Stransky does not delight in noise in the same way as some others who have led the destinies and the beat in orchestras in this city [New York], but he keeps well away from the softer, quieter side of dynamics. His orchestra on Thursday night proved him to be a careful taskmaster; everything was lucid, clear and well rounded, but there was much to be desired in the way of shading, of delicacies and heart-quality."

In 1922 Stránský was joined by Willem Mengelberg and under him the foundations of a great orchestra were laid.

Great applause greeted Wilhelm Furtwängler when he conducted the orchestra as a guest in the years 1924 to 1927, but the mega-tectonic shift came with the return of Arturo Toscanini to America to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

In March 1928, amid collapsing financial support and after several minor mergers, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the New York Symphony Orchestra were amalgamated to become

THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. Toscanini decided which players remained; these included only about twenty members of the Symphony Orchestra. Willem Mengelberg and Arturo Toscanini shared the podium. However, New York was not big enough to accommodate two such charismatic, strong-willed, but diverse directors; Mengelberg left. Toscanini remained in sole charge and in those financially lean times, the orchestra relied more and more on him for full houses. In 1936, unlike previous partings when he had stormed out, he announced his retirement. As Toscanini did not wish to return to fascist Italy, it was probably not difficult for the Radio Corporation of America to lure him back from retirement with the promise of a new orchestra founded especially for him: The first concert of the National Broadcasting Company Symphony Orchestra, on Christmas Day 1937, was for *Musical Courier* "the biggest radio event since King Edward's abdication."

WILLEM MENGELBERG was born in Utrecht in 1871 of German parents. After studying composition, piano and conducting, he made his début in Cologne in 1891. His first post was in Lucerne as Musical Director conducting concerts and opera. Later, he rarely conducted opera. In 1895, he played Liszt's first concerto in Amsterdam with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Kes. It was a double-occasion: Kes, founder of the orchestra in 1888, was leaving and Mengelberg was taking over. Mengelberg ruled the orchestra for almost half a century and under him it rapidly attained international standard. He particularly

championed the works of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler. Strauss, whom he had known since childhood, dedicated *Ein Heldenleben* to him, whilst Mahler became a close friend. In 1903 he assisted Strauss in a festival of his music in London and he collaborated closely with Mahler, for example in 1904 Mahler conducted his fourth symphony in Amsterdam and after the interval Mengelberg conducted it again, and in 1920 in Amsterdam he performed all of Mahler's works.

After the Second World War a Dutch court dismissed him and stripped him of all honours. Certainly Mengelberg had continued to conduct in Amsterdam and also conducted in Germany and Austria during the war. However, a number of Jews testified that he had used his position and contacts to save them. Perhaps he was naïve; either way he went into exile in Switzerland and died there in 1951 just as moves for his rehabilitation were starting.

Mengelberg had a reputation for making long speeches at rehearsals about the music and his sources of information on how to conduct it. For example a large cut in a Tchaikovsky symphony was sanctioned by the composer's brother, Modeste. Nevertheless, however wasteful of rehearsal time and boring for the players, he fashioned his orchestra into a highly disciplined instrument with which he gave exciting performances.

ARTURO TOSCANINI was born in 1867 at Parma. His father was a tailor and his mother sewed to supplement her husband's very meagre income. Inadequate diet may have stunted growth. He learnt to read and became an avid reader. There was no music in his background, but he taught himself to play the piano and learnt contemporary operas.

In 1876 he entered the local music college and became a workaholic, filling every spare moment with studying scores. Perhaps this was the cause of eyesight so poor that throughout his life he had to conduct without a score. At this time he tried conducting college orchestras. In 1885 after graduating cum laude in cello, piano and composition he became an orchestral cellist and joined an opera company travelling to Brazil. The local conductor was so inadequate that the audience became increasingly unruly. Members of company persuaded the 19-year-old to take over. The audience calmed down, stunned by such abilities in a youth conducting from memory.

In 1887 he was a cellist in first performance of *Othello*. He nervously asked Verdi to clarify points in the cello part. In 1892 he conducted the first performance of *Pagliacci*, in 1895 the first performance in Italy of *Die Götterdämmerung*, in 1896 the first performance of *La Bohème*, the same year his first orchestral concert and in 1898 he became Musical Director of La Scala, Milan. Thus he came to the Metropolitan Opera House in 1908 with great experience and a great reputation. However, after a row in 1915 he returned to Italy where he performed for Italian troops and for the Red Cross.

In 1920 he formed a new La Scala Orchestra and took it on tour in North America to give it plenty of practice for the re-opening of La Scala Opera House. On this tour he made his first records. In 1921 he became Musical Director of the re-opened La Scala, but problems mounted due, inter alia, to his refusal to play the fascist hymn at the start of performances. In 1926 he left Italy again, this time to become guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the following year he

became permanent conductor of the newly formed New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. He conducted at Bayreuth in 1931, but refused to return in 1933. Likewise he conducted at Salzburg in 1934, but in 1938 refused to continue.

For several seasons from 1935 he conducted the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra in the Queen's Hall, London.

In 1937 he announced his retirement, but he was persuaded to continue when the National Broadcasting Company offered to form an orchestra specifically for him. In 1940, now 73, he took the N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra on an extensive tour of South America and in 1950, now 83, he toured the United States.

Stories of scenes and tantrums at rehearsals abound. Some were probably genuine, others simulated to achieve what he wanted. (The tenor Leo Slezak said that when Toscanini entertained, no host could be more charming, but the following morning at rehearsal he was a veritable devil.)

He finally retired in 1954 and died in his New York home in 1957.

WALTER DAMROSCH (Breslau 1862-New York 1950) was born into a musical family. His father, Leopold Damrosch was a composer, violinist and conductor, his mother was the singer Helene von Heimburg and his brother, Frank Damrosch conducted and taught. He, himself, showed interest in music very early and was taught harmony by his father. He studied also at the Dresden Conservatoire. In 1871 family emigrated to the United States of America. In 1881 his father mounted a music festival for which Walter trained several sections of the 1200-strong choir, one of which elected him as conductor. In 1884 he was assistant conductor in a season of German opera promoted by his father at the Metropolitan Opera. After his father's death in 1885 he continued in this post under Anton Seidl and succeeded his father as conductor of the New York Symphony Society. In 1894 he started the Damrosch Opera Company, a company of German singers which performed mainly German operas for five years throughout North America. He became a much admired conductor of Wagner. Later, he became a staunch believer in publicising great music by the new medium of wireless. He conducted the New York Symphony Orchestra from 1895 to 1928, including a European tour in 1920. He brought in several European musicians to improve the quality of the orchestra; there were protests from the unions, but the musicians stayed. He composed a number of operas and amongst his songs is the highly emotional *Danny Deever*, which many collectors will know from the recordings by David Bispham.

The BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA was founded in 1881 by Henry Lee Higginson (1834-1919). He selected and hired the players, he determined the conditions of their employment, he built the hall they played in and he financed the whole. His principles were that there should be permanency in membership of an orchestra and that it should play good music. It was benevolent dictatorship by a man who asserted that private wealth should be used for public good and who believed concerts of good music (defined by his severely classical taste) should be available at prices all could afford.



CARL MUCK

As the orchestra's first conductor Higginson chose Georg (later Sir George) Henschel. Henschel was 31, a German-trained singer and composer, a close friend of Brahms, but with little conducting experience. Conductors who succeeded Henschel included Wilhelm Gericke, Arthur Nikisch and, in 1906,

KARL MUCK. Muck was not Higginson's first choice, but he came to recognise his fine qualities: careful preparation, thorough rehearsal, fidelity to the score, clear rhythm and firm discipline, but firm discipline within which musicians were encouraged to play. Indeed, at suitable moments Muck would put down his baton, letting the men continue on their own. Muck came to be recognised by critics and public alike for creating for Boston a world-ranking orchestra. Muck left in 1908, but returned in 1912. He was and remained a German citizen and a favourite of the

Kaiser. In 1917, when the United States entered the war, rumours began to circulate about his loyalties and it was claimed that he was a spy. He may or may not have been having an affair with a 20-year-old, he may or may not have written to her about the Fatherland and our Gracious Kaiser. Probably he would have conducted the *Star Spangled Banner*, but a request from Higginson to do so may have been misunderstood or not have reached him. Whatever the truth, Muck left and Higginson, now 83, had had enough and decided to retire. Shortly before he left, Muck conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra for a series of records. By 1917 records of serious orchestral music were not uncommon, but these were amongst the first, if not the first, of a full hundred-piece orchestra, albeit that, to facilitate the recording process, the players had to be rearranged and the orchestra's dynamic range restricted. Despite these limitations, it is not hard to hear why Muck's conducting was so highly regarded.

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SERGEI KOUSSEVITZKY was born in Vishny-Volotchok, Tver Oblast (now Kalinin) in 1874 of Jewish parents. He took up the double bass and after studying at the Moscow Conservatoire (converting to Christianity in order to do so) he became a noted player of the instrument. However, marriage to the daughter of a wealthy tea merchant enabled him to study conducting in Berlin under Nikisch. In 1908 he hired the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra for his début as a conductor and in 1909 he returned to Moscow and founded his own orchestra. In 1921 he left Russia and in 1924, replacing Pierre Monteux, he began a quarter of a century's association with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His strong personality was projected to achieve a singing beauty of sound. His conducting was sensual, not intellectual. For Grove [*New Dictionary*, 1980] it had, "high emotional intensity, colourful phrasing and dramatic character". All this was achieved despite a stick technique and score reading ability so poor that he employed a pianist as a trainer. Koussevitzky discouraged guest conductors, they might disrupt his artistic discipline. Thus, if he was unavailable he preferred his own concertmaster, Richard Burgin to conduct. He commissioned, published and performed a wide range of modern music, particularly by American composers, but including, for example, *Peter Grimes*. He rarely conducted elsewhere and, atypically, he seldom conducted opera. With his wife's financial means he was able to found a publishing house specialising in modern scores and at Tanglewood he was able to run Summer concert series for the orchestra and programmes of education in music. From 1935 he taught conducting at Tanglewood, his most conspicuous pupil being Leonard Bernstein. Koussevitzky died in Boston in 1951.



SERGEI KOUSSEVITZKY

LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI was born in London in 1882 of Polish and Irish parents. He learnt organ, piano and violin before studying at the Royal College of Music and he was awarded a B.Mus. degree at Queen's College, Oxford. His first post was as organist at St. James's, Piccadilly. In 1905 he became organist at Saint Bartholomew's Church, New York. Under the aegis of the pianist Olga Samaroff of the wealthy Texan Hickenlooper family, he became 5 years younger, acquired a Polish origin and an East European accent of indeterminate location, and, with almost no conducting experience, he became conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in 1909. By 1912 there were difficulties which led to his departure. But Olga Samaroff, now his wife, had

The PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA, moribund and financially unsound, ready for him. With support of the publisher Edward Bok he gained excellent rehearsal facilities and sacked indifferent players. The Philadelphia Orchestra soon became one of the great American institutions. Stokowski espoused new music. When audiences complained he told them off, but without losing his popularity. Under his baton the first American performance of Mahler's 'Symphony of a Thousand'

was a triumph. From 1936 to 1941 he gradually conducted less, Eugene Ormandy gradually taking over. Unlike Toscanini, who disliked everything to do with



LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI

records, Stokowski was very interested and informed in the technology of recorded sound. As early as 1931 there was an LP recording of Beethoven's 5th Symphony and there were many tests for research at the Bell laboratories. In 1941 he became interested in making films. *Fantasia*, with its stereo soundtrack, remains popular to this day. He was involved in organising music for the American Armed Forces and he did much to encourage young people in appreciation of music. He was tall, slim, ruthless and charismatic. Even in his nineties, he achieved always the most sonorous orchestral sound imaginable.

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