

BRUNO WALTER, NBC Symphony Concerts 1940 • Bruno Walter, cond; NBC SO, New York PO¹ • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1157-6 (6 CDs: 450:37) Live: New York, 2/10-3/9/1940, 5/14/1944

BEETHOVEN ¹ *Symphony No. 6.* **HAYDN** *Symphony No. 86.* **BRUCKNER** *Symphony No. 4.* **HANDEL** *Concerto Grosso, op. 6/6.* **MOZART** *Symphony No. 35, K 385, "Haffner". Minuet, K 586/12. Minuet, K 599/5.* **3 German Dances, K 605.** **BRAHMS** *Symphony No. 2.* **D'INDY** *Istar – Variations symphoniques.* **RAVEL** *Rapsodie espagnole.* **SCHUBERT** *Symphony No. 9.* **SCHUMANN** *Symphony No. 4.* **STRAUSS** *Don Juan.* **DEBUSSY** *Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun.* **SMETANA** *The Bartered Bride: Overture. Má Vlast: No. 2, Vltava (The Moldau).* **TCHAIKOVSKY** *Symphony No. 5*

By Henry Fogel

FANFARE November / December 2021

Those of us who admire the conducting of Bruno Walter have been blessed by two sets of restorations of his NBC Symphony broadcasts, remastered by two companies with excellent track records: Immortal Performances and Pristine. They bring different philosophies to their work and therefore offer somewhat different listening experiences. Pristine is the more interventionist of the two. In the case of NBC Symphony broadcasts from Studio 8H they add ambience and present a warmer orchestral sound, perhaps by boosting low and low-midrange frequencies. Immortal Performances more closely matches the original NBC radio broadcast sound. They do a superb job of reducing noise from the original discs without compromising the orchestral sonority. Inner voices and other details are often more evident on Immortal Performances transfers.

Your response will depend on your own taste and preferences. I find satisfaction from both, and often wind up preferring the one I am listening to at the moment. The most important point is that these are immensely valuable documents of a great conductor at work in the prime of his career. Walter is perhaps too well known for his Columbia recordings, made when he was in his 70s and 80s. (He died in 1962 at the age of 85.)

This set brings together all of Walter's concerts with the NBC Symphony in 1940. The repertoire is highly varied, demonstrating that Walter's musical range was much wider than many of us realized. This follows Immortal Performances IPCD 1144-5, the collection of all of Walter's 1939 NBC Symphony concerts.

While there is, generally speaking, more energy and dramatic bite in these performances than there was in his later Columbia studio efforts, the main features of Walter's musical approach remain constant. These include a firm, solid foundation of the lower strings and brass, a natural feeling for the ebb and flow of phrases, and careful attention to orchestral balances. To those qualities these performances add an almost incendiary energy and a crispness

of execution, no doubt due in part to the orchestra's training under Toscanini. It all adds up to extremely dramatic and exciting music making.

The biggest surprise for many will be Walter's affinity for French music. His readings of Vincent d'Indy's *Istar* and Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole* are exquisitely shaded, with a feeling for orchestral color that one might not have associated with him. The *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* confirms this affinity. In all three works Walter's touch is light and the orchestral playing a model of delicacy. The performances are a major addition to our knowledge of his conducting.

I reviewed many of these recordings in *Fanfare* 45:1 when Pristine issued them, so I will just touch on the overlapping performances here. They include the Mozart minuets and dances, Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, and the Fifth Symphonies of Schubert and Tchaikovsky. The Tchaikovsky and Bruckner are remarkable performances and should be known by anyone who admires Walter. The Tchaikovsky Fifth could easily be disguised as a performance led by Willem Mengelberg. The tempo changes in the first movement, the dramatic weight of the second, and the extraordinary extremes of the finale are very exciting. I would not want to listen to this reading too often, because part of its pleasure is the element of surprise. But neither would I want to be without it. Here I would give the sonic edge to Immortal Performances, as more orchestral detail comes across.

The same comments apply to the Bruckner Fourth. It is dramatic rather than congenial, with great flexibility throughout, particularly in the slow movement. I am not a fan of the Loewe edition of this symphony (Furtwängler also used it), but the performance is so thrilling that I am very pleased to have it.

Of the works I haven't previously reviewed, Brahms's Second Symphony is a good place to start. Walter clearly responds to the warm lyricism of this work, but he also adds a great deal of heat to the finale, whose duration is 8:26 here and 9:37 in his studio recording with the Columbia Symphony from 1960. Although barely a 10 percent variation, it is quite significant. I find this NBC performance thrilling, especially because of the precision of the playing and the rhythmic tautness of even the most lyrical passages.

Schubert's "Great" C Major Symphony was a staple of Walter's repertoire, and he made three studio recordings of it. (I discovered this from the scholarly notes in the accompanying booklet by *Fanfare's* James A. Altena). The 1959 Columbia studio recording has never appealed to me; slow tempos and choppy phrasing bog the music down. In this 1940 performance Walter utilizes *rubato* in a subtle way that never interrupts the music's flow and adds warmth to the phrasing. Walter's approach to orchestral sound is keenly felt here, with the bass line providing a firm foundation on which everything else rests. Walter's 1946 studio recording with the New York Philharmonic is essential for Walter collectors—it is one of his most successful studio recordings in the freshness of its approach. But there is an immediacy, a sense of the music being

composed on the spot, about this NBC broadcast that makes it my own preferred Walter performance.

The two Smetana pieces, *The Moldau* and the Overture to *The Bartered Bride*, were firmly in Walter's repertoire. He made studio recordings of each as well as leaving behind another live version. His historical 1941 studio recording for Columbia of *The Moldau* is one of his greatest; it reflects the energy of this live recording the year before but with much more gratifying recorded sound. His 1938 London Symphony recording of the *Bartered Bride Overture* is not as compelling as this NBC account, which for me is his preferred one. It is clear by this fourth concert in the 1940 series that the NBC Symphony musicians had come to know Walter well, and their playing is precise and fervent.

Haydn's 86th Symphony is given a reading marked by its intensity. It is fascinating to look at the timings of each movement in this performance vs. Walter's two other surviving recordings, a studio account with the LSO from 1938 and a live performance with the New York Philharmonic from 1948. Altena conveniently provides them. It is clear that the tempos here are not faster (the timing comparison is skewed by the omission of repeats in the third and fourth movements of the LSO recording), but the performance feels faster because of the added intensity. While Walter certainly conveys the music's geniality here, he does so in a context that is considerably more exciting.

Schumann's Fourth Symphony is a particularly valuable inclusion of this set. Walter's two studio recordings, one from 1928 with a French pickup orchestra, the other from 1938 with the LSO, suffer from muffled recorded sound. The performance in this set is dramatic, always moving forward with driven momentum. The clarity of Studio 8H's sound works to Walter's benefit in this instance. In Strauss's *Don Juan* he finds just the right balance, giving both the tumultuous and the tender elements of the score their due while integrating them into a whole. The great care he takes with gradations of tempo and dynamics is responsible for maintaining the unity of the piece.

Beethoven's "Pastorale" Symphony is included as a bonus. It doesn't derive from the 1940 NBC Symphony season but is a 1944 New York Philharmonic broadcast from Carnegie Hall. It is present because Immortal Performances likes to fill its discs with maximum duration (and value). Walter made three studio recordings of the "Pastorale," first and famously in 1936 with the Vienna Philharmonic, followed in 1946 with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and in 1958 in stereo with the Columbia Symphony. Additionally, there are live performances from 1949 (New York Philharmonic), early 1950s (Los Angeles Philharmonic), as well as the 1944 NYPO version preserved here. Interestingly, this one survives in superior sound to the later New York Philharmonic broadcast, and for me it is also the most compelling of the six. The gentle side of Walter's conducting makes for a really lovely overview, with especially sensitive phrasing; in the storm movement he lets loose.

The overall impression of Walter from these 1940 NBC broadcasts is of a conductor more willing to be interventionist, flexible, and spontaneous. Some of his tempo modifications give the impression of being conceived in the heat of

the moment, and the NBC Symphony musicians respond with energy and commitment. There is hardly a single phrase in these six CDs that sounds as if it is being played on auto-pilot.

As I indicated at the beginning of this review, this set is essential if you are to have a true understanding of one of the great conductors of the 20th century, captured here in live performances in the prime of his career. Immortal Performances' usual extras are included—in addition to Altena's superb essay (it would be insulting to call it program notes), there are Richard Caniell's recording notes and great historical photos, and the original broadcast commentary as well.

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In the Mar/ Apr 2021 issue of *Fanfare* (44:4), I reviewed the Immortal Performances (IP) 5-disc set of Bruno Walter's 1939 concerts with the NBC Symphony Orchestra (1144-5). A new release from IP (6 discs, priced as 5) comprises the quintet of 1940 Walter-NBC SO concerts that took place over the period of February 10-March 9. As with the 1939 set, I believe this represents the first comprehensive issue of the 1940 concerts. In my prior review, I characterized IP's 1939 Walter/NBC SO set as a "glorious collection, essential for anyone interested in the legacy of Bruno Walter, one of the 20th century's podium giants." The same applies to the 1940 set, and for many reasons. Several of the performances on this set represent Walter's only recorded version of the work in question; Handel's Concerto Grosso, op.6/6, d'Indy's *Istar*, Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*, and the Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5. In addition, Walter never made a commercial studio recording of Debussy's *Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun* (although there are other Los Angeles and Philadelphia live performances). But even the performances here of repertoire Walter also recorded commercially are of the utmost importance. In my review of the 1939 IP set, I went into some detail as to why I believe Walter's WWII concerts are such a significant part of his legacy. Walter was then in the midst of the most tempestuous period in his life. During the 1930s, Walter, of Jewish birth, was forced out of Germany, and then Austria, by the Nazis. Walter and his wife relocated to the United States. In 1939, Walter suffered the further horrific tragedy of the murder of his daughter Gretel by her estranged husband (who then committed suicide). As I wrote in relation to the 1939 NBC SO set: "I mention these facts for historical reasons, but also for musical considerations. In terms of recordings, Bruno Walter is best known for his extensive catalogue for Columbia Records (now, Sony Classical), and especially a series of stereo LPs

he made in the final years of his life. They are treasurable recordings indeed, but they only tell a part of the story of Walter's achievements and artistry. The Columbia monophonic recordings made in the 1940s and 50s document a more intense and propulsive interpreter (Sony Classical's recent "Bruno Walter: The Complete Columbia Album Collection" offers numerous opportunities to compare Walter in the same repertoire at different stages of his life). To this we may add that Walter, like many conductors of his era, was generally an even more intense and engaged artist in live performance on the concert stage and in the opera house. That intensity is further accentuated in the live performances of the wartime years. Like his contemporary Wilhelm Furtwängler, Bruno Walter's concerts from that era often embody a life or death struggle not recaptured in the later interpretations (throughout the NBC SO concerts, you can hear Walter, time and time again, vocally exhorting the musicians to give their best). Again, this is not to say that the wartime recordings are necessarily superior to what Walter later achieved. But they are magnificent, unique documents, and essential for an understanding of Walter's conducting legacy." The 1939 and 1940 NBC SO concerts document Walter's collaboration with a first-rate ensemble, one that had been under Toscanini's direction since late 1937. And the 1940 NBC SO concerts reap the further benefit of the artists' intense work during the previous year. The sense of collaboration and unanimity of artistic intent is palpable.

February 10, 1940: The concert opens with Haydn's Symphony No. 86. Walter phrases the first movement's *Adagio* introduction with the utmost grace, nobility, and delicacy. This serves as the perfect foil to the ensuing *Allegro spiritoso*, taken at a fleet tempo, and punctuated by vigorous and sharply-articulated accents. As with Walter's Mozart of that period, Haydn is clearly positioned as a forerunner of Beethoven and the ensuing Romantic movement. The second movement *Largo*, broadly paced, exudes lyricism and warmth. Walter also takes the minuet third movement at a measured clip, but the crisp accents and keen juxtapositions of contrasting dynamics give the music ample energy and flow. There's nothing measured about the tempo of the finale in this performance. The music bursts out of the gate, brimming with energy, fire, and humor. Walter is ever mindful of Haydn's masterful employment of contrasts, and he builds the music to a stirring finish. The program concludes with the Bruckner Fourth Symphony. In 1960, Walter made a justly famous studio recording of the Bruckner 4 with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. It is a marvelous account of this work, and beautifully recorded. The contrasts between the 1960 studio recording and the 1940 NBC concert performance are striking. The 1960 recording employs the Haas edition, while the NBC performance uses the Schalk and Löwe. The NBC rendition is a noticeably fleeter account, with a total time of approximately 58 minutes (66 for the Columbia SO recording). But the quicker tempos in the 1940 performance tell but part of the story. For it is marked by an impetuosity and flexibility worlds apart from the more stately 1960 version. Walter's liberal employment

of rubato, along with enchanting string portamentos, further emphasize the Romantic heritage of this work (not to mention its nickname). If you know and love the 1960 studio recording, you must hear the 1940 interpretation.

February 17, 1940: As previously mentioned, the Handel Concerto Grosso in G minor, Opus 6, No. 6 that opens this concert is the only Walter recording of the work. Walter conducts from the keyboard; a modern piano, not the harpsichord of Handel's time. And the performance is entirely of the old school, with a rich and sonorous complement of strings. Violinists Mischa Mischakoff and Edwin Bachmann, along with cellist Frank Miller, form the *concertino* portion of the ensemble. It's a lovely performance, and beautifully played. Walter takes the opening movement of Mozart's "Haffner" Symphony at a bracing clip, adding a thrilling accelerando at the conclusion of both the exposition and movement proper. The relatively broad tempos of the second and third movements provide the appropriate contrast, setting the stage for a blazing account of the finale, taken at a furious pace that the NBC SO executes to the hilt (this was Toscanini's orchestra, after all). The concluding Brahms Second offers a superb realization of the work's contrast of lyrical, pastorale elements with episodes of intensity and, at times, darkness. The first movement is notable for Walter's masterful application of rubato, and the beautiful singing line he sustains throughout. The string portamentos in the second movement, and playful tempo fluctuations in the third offer special pleasure. As with the "Haffner", Walter sets a fleet tempo for the finale of the Brahms 2, a joyous, celebratory account that culminates in a whirlwind account of the final measures.

February 24, 1940: The d'Indy *Istar* and Ravel *Rapsodie espagnole* from this concert are Walter's only extant recordings of those works. The d'Indy is a fine performance in every way. Walter and the NBC SO revel in the French composer's rich and varied orchestral sonorities. Walter also does a masterful job of pacing the work so that the various sections dovetail into each other in seamless fashion. If this performance doesn't eclipse Pierre Monteux's superb 1945 RCA recording with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, it is excellent in its own right, and is of course a must for Walter aficionados. Equally impressive is the *Rapsodie espagnole*. Walter and the NBC SO have the full measure of Ravel's gorgeous, transparent orchestration. The various Spanish dances, phrased with a beguiling flexibility, are teeming with the powers of seduction. In the concluding *Feria*, Walter masterfully balances the elements of celebration and repose, all phrased with the utmost flexibility. What a pity that Walter's planned all-Ravel stereo LP with the Columbia SO never came to fruition. With the Schubert Ninth Symphony, we are back on far more familiar Walter terrain. It's a memorable performance, notable for the orchestra's unity of ensemble and rich, singing tone, a constant sense of energy and momentum, and a celebration of Schubert's lyric genius via imaginative, ever-alert phrasing. The NBC SO performance of the Schubert 9 is a valuable complement to

Walter's 1946 Columbia studio recording with the NY Phil; the latter featuring better sound, the former, providing the special intensity of a live concert.

March 2, 1940: This concert is a masterpiece in both its programming and execution. The concert opens with two surging Romantic works by German composers, the Schumann Fourth Symphony, and Richard Strauss's tone poem *Don Juan*. The Schumann begins in darkness, ultimately resolving to blazing triumph, while *Don Juan* pursues the opposite journey. Walter and the NBC SO approach both works with the utmost intensity, and if I am repeating myself by acknowledging the masterful flexibility of phrasing in these performances, it is central to their success. Debussy's French Impressionist trailblazer, the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, serves as a sort of intermezzo. The d'Indy and (especially) the Ravel performances of the previous week's concert both suggested that Walter would excel in this music, and indeed he does. Walter embraces Debussy's magical, dreamlike sound world, eliciting playing of the utmost beauty, transparency, and delicacy. The phrasing has a seductive, unerring ebb and flow. A beautiful performance. The program concludes with a return to life-affirming Romantic expression, this time by way of Bohemia; Smetana's *The Moldau*, and the Overture to his opera *The Bartered Bride*. Walter was a superb opera conductor, a talent that serves him well in both these works. The various episodes of *The Moldau* are presented and developed with the utmost character and individuality, without ever sacrificing the work's overall momentum. *The Bartered Bride* Overture, seven minutes of unalloyed energy and optimism, is brilliantly performed, bringing the concert to a rousing and triumphant close.

March 9, 1940: The final concert in this series begins with the Schubert Fifth Symphony. Walter begins the opening movement quite broadly, but his pacing soon takes on a much more energetic and propulsive quality, without sacrificing Schubert's lyricism. That lyricism shines again in the beautiful slow-tempo second movement, here taken by Walter in leisurely fashion throughout. Schubert and Walter change course in the third movement, with fleet tempos and pungent accents. The finale is also paced at a sprightly clip, and executed with the utmost vigor and precision. All told, Walter reveals a more energetic and propulsive character than is the norm in performances of this work. Charming performances of Mozart Minuets and German dances set the stage for the performance of the Tchaikovsky Fifth Symphony (a work Toscanini never performed either with the NBC SO, or any other ensemble). Walter emphasizes the dark elements of the first movement's slow-tempo introduction, pacing the music expansively, and lending considerable weight to the orchestral sonority. For the ensuing *Allegro con anima*, Walter favors strikingly brisk tempos. But they serve as the foundation for an interpretation that is noteworthy for its complete absence of regimentation, with a constant, arresting metric ebb and flow executed to perfection by the NBC musicians. It's a bracing account to be sure, but all the more impactful due to Walter's mastery in

shaping the music's flow and climaxes. The second movement is played in a more straightforward fashion, with a sparer, more subtle application of rubato. It all flows seamlessly and beautifully, with the reprises of the "fate" motif packing tremendous impact. In the third movement, Walter shapes the central waltz with the utmost elegance and grace, while the central episode trips along in gossamer fashion. The reappearance of the "fate" motif toward the close is appropriately ominous and understated, before yielding to the emphatic final chords. Walter paces the finale's *Andante maestoso* introduction (the Symphony's first voicing of the fate motif in the major key) in conventional fashion, and executed with great intensity. The ensuing battle depicted in the *Allegro vivace* is, on the other hand, taken at a remarkably broad tempo. Nonetheless, the orchestra articulates the music with fierce resolution, and the momentum never abates. The start of the final episode (*Moderato assai e molto maestoso*) returns to a more conventional pacing. But given what immediately preceded it, the music sounds both appropriately triumphant, and fleet. And in the final *Presto*, Walter steps on the gas, leading the orchestra in a wild and ever-accelerating race to the finish. The musicians once again rise to the occasion, and the effect is absolutely thrilling. This is a quite individual and first-rate performance of the Tchaikovsky Fifth. And, as Bruno Walter's only surviving recording of this work, it is a document of the utmost importance.

As a bonus (placed at the very start of the set, in order to allow the Brucker 4 to be played uninterrupted), IP includes a May 14, 1944 broadcast of the Beethoven "Pastorale" Symphony with Walter and the New York Philharmonic. Walter made three superb studio recordings of the "Pastorale" (Vienna Philharmonic, 1936; Philadelphia Orchestra, 1946; Columbia Symphony Orchestra, 1958), music that could have been created for his interpretive gifts. The 1944 NY Phil concert performance is another gem. The first movement, moderately paced, strikes an ideal balance between overarching lyricism and sense of wonder and joy as the composer begins his exploration of nature. The second movement likewise glows with a warmth of orchestral color and affectionate phrasing, culminating in a beautifully phrased account of the delightful bird calls at movement's close. The third movement has an irrepressible, rambunctious energy, and the ensuing thunderstorm packs all the punch one could desire. Walter shapes the finale with the utmost affection. He elicits a gorgeous singing tone from the orchestra, and shapes Beethoven's melodies with a pulse both flexible and unerring. As the 1946 Philadelphia Orchestra "Pastorale" is the only symphony from Walter's mono Columbia Beethoven cycle not played by the NY Phil, this 1944 concert performance is of particular interest.

IP's restorations of the source material for these musical treasures are excellent. The sound is not quite on a par with the finest studio recordings of the time; but it has more than sufficient detail, orchestral color, and dynamic range to allow full enjoyment of these exceptional performances. Spoken

broadcast commentary and audience applause accompany both the NBC SO and NY Phil broadcast performances. As in the case of the 1939 Walter-NBC SO retrospective, my *Fanfare* colleague James A. Altena is the author of the superb booklet notes. They offer invaluable detail and analysis of Walter's life and career, and the featured performances. Altena provides in-depth comparisons of the NBC SO performances to other Walter recordings of the repertoire, both studio and live. Richard Caniell's Recording Notes describe the source audio materials, and the challenges involved in restoring them for issue. Like its predecessor, IP's release of the 1940 Walter-NBC SO concerts is a triumph in all respects; a unique and irreplaceable document of one of the 20th century's greatest and most important conductors. Highest recommendation.

5 stars: Bruno Walter's electrifying 1940 NBC SO concerts