

### **Bruno Walter Conducts:**

***Requiem, K 626:*** Eleanor Steber, Enid Szánthó, William Hain, Nicola Moscona, Westminster Choir, New York Philharmonic O; November 9, 1941

**Symphony No. 35, K 385:** NYPO; February 5, 1950

**Piano Concerto No. 20, K 466:** Rudolf Firkušný, NYPO; February 5, 1950

**Symphony No. 40, K 550:** NYPO; February 5, 1950

***Sinfonia concertante, K 364:*** John Corigliano Sr., William Lincer, NYPO; March 10, 1946

**Piano Concerto No. 22, K 482:** Artur Schnabel, NYPO; November 16, 1941

**Symphony No. 38, K 504:** Maggio Musicale Fiorentino O; November 28, 1954

***Eine kleine Nachtmusik, K 525:*** Orchestre national de la R.T.F.; June 14, 1956

**& Neville Cardus Memorial Tribute to Bruno Walter, interviews with Lotte Lehmann, Lotte Lindt, and Walter • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1173-4 (4 CDs: 305:56)**

### **Ken Meltzer**

#### **FAFARE September / October 2022**

This is a new four-disc (priced as three) set from Immortal Performances (IP) features conductor Bruno Walter in 1940s and 50s performances of music by Mozart.

All but two works on this set receive world premiere CD issues. The *Sinfonia concertante* and Piano Concerto No. 22 are made available once again in new sonic restorations, after having been out of print for some time. All of the performances are reproduced in fine sound that allows full appreciation of the musical glories. Some of the performances also include brief commentary by the broadcast announcer.

Bruno Walter (1876-1962), born at the height of the Romantic era, was celebrated for his interpretations of Brahms, Wagner, and Bruckner. Walter became a protégé of Gustav Mahler, and one of his greatest advocates and interpreters. Walter acknowledged that in his early years, he found the music of Mozart too restrained and dainty for his tastes. But Mahler's superb interpretations of Mozart did much to convince Walter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century composer's greatness. In time, Walter became known as one of the finest Mozart conductors of his generation. One of Walter's defining attributes—not just in Mozart—was his quest to do full justice to the score, without drawing undue attention to himself and his musicians. This is not to suggest that Walter's interpretations lacked profile or individuality. But my sense is that all of Walter's artistic choices were made with the goal of focusing upon the composer's creative achievements. There is a naturalness and inevitability about Walter's conducting that is decidedly evident in his

Mozart, and in all the performances on this IP set. Among his contemporaries, Walter strikes me as among the finest in striking a convincing and rewarding balance between Mozart's Classical era sense of proportion and elegance, and the composer's foreshadowing of 19<sup>th</sup> century expression. One of the finest examples of this may be found in a thrilling 1937 Salzburg Festival *Don Giovanni* (reissued by IP: 1091-3) that I reviewed in the Nov/Dec 2017 *Fanfare* (41:2). It's a performance packed with tension, darkness, and energy, but also, when appropriate, elegance, lyricism, and a deft touch. Walter's Mozart took on a more relaxed and genial guise over time, especially in the conductor's final years. But the many strengths of his Mozart interpretations may be found throughout the course of a discography spanning four decades. Walter's preference for larger ensembles and avoidance of score repeats hearken to an earlier period of Mozart interpretations. But Walter's transparency of ensemble, beautiful singing line, and subtle, effective use of rubato remain fresh today. Again, to speak of balance, Walter achieves all of this with pacing that never dawdles. There is ample energy (in his earlier days, it could at times border on the manic) in Walter's tempos and articulation. I think that Walter's extensive work as an opera conductor served him well in his pacing and voicing of orchestral repertoire, Mozart included. 60 years after his death, Walter's Mozart recordings continue to impress as superbly conceived and executed, and an important realization of the composer's genius.

Bruno Walter made celebrated studio recordings of the following works included on the IP Mozart set: the *Requiem*, Piano Concerto No. 20, Symphonies 35, 38, 40, and *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. The featured concert performances of the works all evidence the strengths of Walter's Mozart that may also be heard in the studio versions, and that I outlined above. It is wonderful to hear the young Eleanor Steber, in gorgeous voice, as part of the solo quartet in the 1941 NYPO *Requiem*. And it is instructive to find Walter achieving his distinguished interpretations of Mozart in live performance, and with three different orchestral ensembles. The presence of an audience adds that extra touch of urgency not easily recreated in the recording studio. But in the final analysis, I don't think that in general, these excellent live performances provide any unusual or different perspective on Walter's way with Mozart. The one outlier is the February 5, 1950 NYPO performance of the Piano Concerto No. 20. There are two recordings of the Concerto No. 20 with Walter as both soloist and conductor; a May 7, 1937 Vienna studio recording, and March 11, 1939 NBC SO broadcast (the latter available on IP 1144-5, Mar/Apr 2021 *Fanfare*, 44:4). In the 1950 broadcast, Walter conducts in collaboration with pianist with Rudolf Firkušný. In his superb liner notes, James A. Altena writes: "So far as I can determine this was (Firkušný's) only appearance together with Walter, making it a unique event..." It is also one of the finest renditions I've heard of this oft-performed and recorded concerto. In the 1939 NBC SO performance, Walter adopts a decidedly propulsive, brooding approach, both in his playing and conducting. The 1950 performance with Firkušný is more restrained, one that expresses melancholy and resignation more than anger. This is an approach adopted by both soloist and conductor, a testament to Walter's flexibility as a collaborator and interpreter (again, I think, in part the product of his operatic work). Firkušný's immaculate, sensitive, and expressive playing evokes firsthand accounts of Mozart at the keyboard. There are many episodes in the first and third movements where the soloist is called upon to repeat brief thematic motifs. Firkušný always finds just the right inflection, color, and dynamic to give these repetitions welcome and fulfilling variety. And Firkušný's rendition of the second movement *Andante*, beautiful in tone and sensitively phrased, is a masterclass in making the piano sing. Walter secures alert and expressive playing from the NY Phil. This is an absolute treasure, one that should be heard by all who love the D-minor Concerto.

The remaining two concerto performances of works unique to Walter's discography of published recordings, are glorious, too. The March 10, 1946 NY Phil broadcast performance of the *Sinfonia concertante*, K 364, features New York Philharmonic Concertmaster John Corigliano Sr. and Principal Viola, William Lincer. Both soloists play with a beautiful, rich, focused tone, flexibility of phrasing and dynamics that are compelling, if not necessarily reflective of 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics. Their unanimity of approach is also notable, and so essential in a work in which the soloists are constantly in tandem. Walter's energetic and sensitive conducting is once again in total sympathy with the soloists. The Piano Concerto No. 22, from a broadcast performance of November 16, 1941, is the only recorded document of the collaboration between two musical giants of the 20th century; Walter and pianist Artur Schnabel. It is also Schnabel's only recording of the work. Walter conducts the opening movement in crisp, robust fashion. Schnabel, playing with a lightness of touch and full embrace of the music's humorous elements, is a marvelous foil. In the *Andante*, both Schnabel and Walter embody the pathos at the heart of this movement, all the while maintaining an affecting restraint. The rondo finale sparkles, right from Schnabel's buoyant introduction of the principal theme to the ebullient close. And the remarkable intervening *Andantino cantabile* episode is played with the utmost grace and introspection. The opportunity to hear Schnabel play his marvelous first and third movement cadenzas is a considerable bonus. As a composer, Schnabel often explored the adventurous tonal world of many of his contemporaries. And in the cadenzas, Schnabel balances Mozartean expression with intriguing harmonic twists and turns. As with the Piano Concerto No. 20 broadcast, the Schnabel/Walter No. 22 is essential listening.

The final disc offers a broadcast memorial tribute to Walter by Neville Cardus, as well as interviews with soprano Lotte Lehmann, Walter's daughter Lotte Lindt, and, finally, Walter. Cardus's tribute is concise, eloquent, and provides a deep appreciation of Walter's art. The interviews offer a wealth of information about Walter, the musician and man. All of the interviewees have compelling personalities, and are gratifyingly forthcoming. My *Fanfare* colleague James A. Altena provides the set's booklet notes. Altena is a scholar and authority on Walter's life, career, and discography. His detailed notes provide a comprehensive survey of Walter's recordings of the featured repertoire, as well as Altena's keen insights into Walter's musicianship. Artist bios and Richard Caniell's Recordings Notes round out the printed materials. I think this set is worth acquisition just for the three priceless concerto performances. But in truth, the release offers a treasure of musical and spoken materials that are a fitting document of Walter's undying devotion to Mozart. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars: A glorious Mozart/Bruno Walter collection from Immortal Performances

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## Review by

Henry Fogel

FANFARE September/ October 2022

Bruno Walter's love of Mozart's music, and his understanding of it, came from his mentor, Gustav Mahler. The illuminating booklet essay by *Fanfare's* James A. Altena

quotes an assertion from Walter: "Mahler saved Mozart from the lie of daintiness as well as from the boredom of academic dryness." Throughout his long career Walter's advocacy for Mozart remained constant, as did his approach to the music. In all orchestral music, including Mozart's, Walter built the sound on the foundation of a strong bass line. Sonority was always rich but never clouded or muddy. Accents were firm without being heavy-handed, and tempos were usually moderate but occasionally quite fast. Above all, there was always a singing line, not surprising from a conductor who began his career in the opera house.

A highlight of this Immortal Performances set is the Piano Concerto No. 22, K 482 with Artur Schnabel. It is an extraordinary collaboration between two great artists and has been available on Music & Arts as well as other labels, but it sounds far better here. In fact, the sound is superb for a 1941 radio broadcast. The first movement sings almost operatically, and the *Andante* is hushed and poetic. Listening to the finale, one can imagine conductor and soloist smiling together as the music's playfulness is highlighted. This is one of the great Mozart piano concerto performances on record.

Altena documents seven Walter recordings of the *Requiem* (in Süßmayr's completion, of course), one made for Columbia in the studio while the rest are live performances dating from 1937 to 1958. Here, the 1941 performance features exquisite singing from soprano Eleanor Steber and fine singing by the other soloists. As Altena points out, the Westminster Choir and New York Philharmonic reveal their unfamiliarity with the then rarely played score.

(In the *Tuba mirum* the principal trombone apparently had one of those terrible moments that can afflict brass players. Producer Richard Caniell has rightly decided to patch the mishaps from another Walter performance, but retains all of Moscona's singing.) In later years Walter's approach to the *Requiem* became a bit lighter, but this performance is in no way too weighty. If we had no other recording of the work from him, we would feel privileged to have this one. While there is some congestion in the sound, Caniell has restored it well.

Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor was clearly a favorite of Walter's, and in two live recordings from the 1930s he is also the piano soloist. He eventually stopped playing in public, except for accompanying Lieder recitals. There are recorded performances of Concerto No. 20 under him with Myra Hess and this one with Rudolf Firkušný. While not quite at the exalted level of the Schnabel performance of No. 22, this is nonetheless an impressive partnership. It is at its best in the outer movements, which are rhythmically buoyant and delicate. I do find the pianist a bit prosaic in the *Andante*. Walter tries to add some lyrical urgency, but little about the slow movement is memorable. Sonically the source for this recording is inferior to the Schnabel. It is congested, poorly balanced, and compressed. Caniell has made the sound surprisingly listenable.

I didn't realize until reading the program notes that Walter refrained from conducting the great G-Minor Symphony until he was past fifty. He held the work in such reverence that he did not dare to lead it until then. Afterwards he made up for lost time, conducting Symphony No. 40 so often that there are 11 surviving recorded performances (three studio, eight live). This 1950 New York Philharmonic broadcast is among the finest of the live ones, perfectly balancing energy and warmth. Walter's attention to balance pays dividends in the clarity of the wind parts and also of Mozart's daring harmonic structure. His mono studio recording (1953) was a landmark, but this performance has a slight edge in spontaneity and excitement. Caniell apologizes in his

recording notes for the quality of the recording, but I found it more than adequate for anyone accustomed to historic broadcasts.

The "Haffner" Symphony performance derives from the same February 5, 1950, concert as Symphony No. 40 and the D-Minor Piano Concerto with Firkušný. The same vitality and attention to balances and textures are present here, and there is a real *frisson* to the performance, particularly the finale. Immortal Performances' set affords you the opportunity to hear the entire concert just as the audience did 72 years ago.

The "Prague" Symphony is a wonderful find, a rare example of Walter's work in Italy. Recorded at the Florence May Festival in 1954, the orchestra must have been one of Italy's best. Vittorio Gui founded the festival and led it from 1928 to 1936. Many important conductors appeared there in symphonic and operatic performances, including Dmitri Mitropoulos, Artur Rodziński, Erich Kleiber, and Carlo Maria Giulini. There is a touch of roughness in some of the string playing, but it is not major, and the wind playing is quite distinguished. Walter's studio recordings of Symphony No. 38 are more relaxed than his live performances, particularly in the outer movements. The *Andante* is warm and supple phrased, while in the first and third movements Walter creates a unique amalgam of weight and momentum.

The *Sinfonia Concertante* from 1946 is the only version in the Walter discography. Altena notes a 1956 Chicago Symphony version with two principals from that orchestra, commenting that the recording is in private hands and has never circulated. The present one is delightful. John Corigliano and William Lincer, New York Philharmonic concertmaster and principal viola, play with unity of phrasing and interaction with the orchestra. I find the microphone placement a bit too close to the soloists, but aside from that, the sound quality is fine.

*Eine kleine Nachtmusik* was recorded four times in the studio by Walter, beginning in 1931 and ending in 1958. The live recording here was made during Walter's final tour of France in 1956. The elegant, lightly textured performance is a treat; it is livelier and more graceful than the studio recordings.

In addition to Altena's essay the booklet contains some lovely photos of Walter; Caniell's recording notes explain his work on these restorations. The fourth CD is a treasure (and a true bonus, since the set sells for the price of three discs). The two interviews of Lotte Lehmann recounting what Walter meant to her as a teacher are particularly illuminating. The real gem, though, is the interview of Walter by Robert Trotter, dean of the music school at the University of Oregon. I wish we knew the date, or at least year, of the interview.. This generously filled disc (79:26) is a fitting conclusion to this tribute to one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century.