

Toscanini  
Premiere Release: Complete Concert  
Beethoven Symphony No. 1 In C, Op. 21  
Beethoven Symphony No. 9 In D, Op. 125  
Eileen Farrell - Nan Merriman - Jan Peerce - Norman Scott  
Robert Shaw Chorale - Robert Shaw, director  
NBC Symphony Orchestra  
Commentator: Ben Grauer, 29 March 1952

Beethoven 9th Rehearsal: Fourth Movement, 27 March 1952

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 37  
Dame Myra Hess  
24 November 1946

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1172-2 (2 CDs: 149:43)

### **Ken Meltzer**

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On March 29, 1952 at New York's Carnegie Hall, Arturo Toscanini conducted a program comprising Beethoven's First and Ninth Symphonies. It was the last time Toscanini would conduct either of these works in concert. On March 31 and April 1, the artists who performed the Beethoven Ninth returned to Carnegie Hall to make their legendary studio recording of that work for RCA. For the March 29, 1952 program, NBC broadcast only the Beethoven Ninth. A new release by Immortal Performances (IP) offers the world premiere release of the entire March 29, 1952 concert, including the Beethoven First not broadcast to the public. The March 29, 1952 Beethoven First included on the IP set makes for an interesting comparison with the commercial recording of December 21, 1951. As one might anticipate, given the duplication of artists, and minimal time gap between the studio recording and performance, there are many similarities. Both performances are fleet, energetic, keenly articulated, and marvelously transparent. Even with Toscanini's preference for quick tempos, neither performance sounds rushed. Toscanini understood how to make Beethoven's symphonies breathe and sing. The *Adagio molto* introduction to the first movement is given its full due. In the ensuing *Allegro con brio*, if Toscanini does not slow the pace for the lovely second principal theme (beginning at m. 52), he elicits tender playing from the orchestra that creates a sense of repose. The second movement *Andante cantabile con moto*, as Beethoven directs, balances forward momentum with a lovely, singing line. And Toscanini's genius at balancing principal and subsidiary material (ex., in movement 2, the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin and cello lines at mm. 100-106), further highlights the beauty inherent in this work. As for points of departure, the total times for each movement in the March 29 performance are slightly faster (The only outlier is the first movement; with the studio version at 8:22, and the concert performance at 6:17. But that is because Toscanini observes the exposition repeat in the former, and not in the latter. Shorn of its exposition repeat, the December 21, 1951 movement has a TT of 6:29). At the start of the first movement's *Allegro con brio*, there is some slight imprecision of string ensemble not evident in the studio recording. Sonically,

the December 21, 1951 recording offers more of the warm, blended sound one expects in studio recordings. The March 29, 1952 broadcast has a more immediate and lively acoustic. One gets the sense of being in closer proximity to the musicians. And to my ears, the broadcast performance is the more spirited of the two. While I am not suggesting that it supplants the more famous studio version, I think every Toscanini admirer will want to hear it. I'm grateful to IP for offering its world premiere release.

Only a few days separate the March 29, 1952 concert Beethoven Ninth from the RCA studio recording. The differences are few, both worth noting. Once again, the tempos are slightly quicker in the concert performance. And once again, the concert performance strikes me as somewhat more propulsive. The only exception is the finale. The fourth movement of the March 29, 1952 Ninth has a TT of 24:04, while the studio version is 23:23. One of the episodes Toscanini conducts at a broader pace occurs at the very outset. The final movement opens with the orchestra's *Presto, fortissimo* explosion. What immediately follows is an episode of breathtaking creativity and originality (mm. 8-91). The cellos and basses sing music Beethoven directs be played "according to the character of a recitative but, in tempo". That cello/bass recitative mimics the kind of music vocalists in an opera deliver to set the stage for the upcoming aria or ensemble. One by one, the principal themes of each of the first three movements of the Beethoven Ninth appear, only to be rejected in turn by the lower-strings recitative. Finally, the winds suggest the Ode "To Joy" theme, and the lower strings voice their approval. This is music tailor-made for a conductor like Toscanini, with a lifetime of experience in both the opera house and concert hall. In the broadcast performance, this sequence takes 2:50. The studio recording lasts 2:37. But it's not just the additional time that separates the two versions. In the concert performance, Toscanini shapes the music with a flexibility and nuance of phrasing, articulation, and color that sets it apart from the admirable studio recording. One truly gets the sense of human voices passing judgment over the prior music, before opening the gates for the Ode "To Joy". The masterful delineation of this sequence makes the subsequent full appearance of the Ode, in all its orchestral and vocal settings, even more breathtaking. And how fortunate we are to be witness to how this magical performance came to be! For IP includes as a bonus a rehearsal sequence from March 27, 1952 (two days before the concert), in which Toscanini coaches the cellos and double basses in this music. The care, patience, and commitment to the music Toscanini communicates on this occasion are both revelatory and touching. For me, that rehearsal sequence and the results as documented in the March 29 concert performance would justify purchase of this set. But the concert Beethoven Nine is a wonderful performance in its own right. And once again, the sound quality makes it a strong competitor with the official RCA studio version. Announcer Ben Grauer's commentary and the audience's rousing ovation at concert's end bring us even closer to this historic occasion.

There is yet another treasure in this IP release; a November 24, 1946 broadcast from Studio 8H of the Beethoven Third Piano Concerto with Dame Myra Hess, Toscanini, and the NBC SO. Arturo Toscanini: The Complete RCA Collection includes an October 29, 1944 Studio 8H Beethoven Third Concerto with Artur Rubinstein and the NBC SO. As opposed to the Beethoven First and Ninth Symphonies already discussed, the differences between the two performances of the Third Piano Concerto are striking. Toscanini adopts a much quicker basic tempo for the opening movement of the Hess performance (14:38 v. 15:23), and the orchestral playing has more drive and ferocity. The connection between the Third Piano Concerto and the Fifth Symphony is laid bare. Hess, more than Rubinstein, evokes the first-hand accounts of the

heaven-storming Beethoven, a man whose muscular, vigorous playing tested the keyboards of his day to their limits. But Hess also plays the contrasting lyrical moments in the opening movement with great care and sensitivity. She, far more than Rubinstein, captures the dramatic contrasts and struggles at the heart of Beethoven's music. The second movement of the Hess/Toscanini Beethoven Third is more than a minute longer than the Rubinstein (9:32 v. 8:12). And Hess and Toscanini use every second to explore the heartfelt and aching lyricism in this extraordinary music. Rubinstein's version is lovely, too, but it is Hess's, to my ears, that gets to the heart of the matter. And it's notable, I think, that Toscanini was willing to accommodate two such different approaches. The two performances of the finale have fewer contrasts, but once again, I find Hess bringing more vigor and personality to the music. Rubinstein's account has many strengths, of course, but the Hess performance is stunning. The recorded sound of the 1946 broadcast is not the equal of the 1952 Beethoven concert. But it has ample detail and color, and is certainly competitive with the 1944 Rubinstein officially issued by RCA.

IP's booklet includes an informative essay by Robert Matthew-Walker, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. All of the material included on this release is of the highest distinction and interest. The rehearsal and concert performance of the Beethoven Ninth finale, as well as the Hess Beethoven Third Piano Concerto, make this release essential. Recommended with the greatest enthusiasm.

5 Stars: Treasurable Beethoven/Toscanini from Immortal Performances

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Review by

**Colin Clarke**

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Toscanini's Beethoven can easily be heard as ahead of its time: the clean lines and textures, the rapid speeds. This is particularly evident in the first movement of the First Symphony, heard here in this, the world premiere release of the complete concert of March 29, 1952. All of the performances here are from the last decade of Toscanini's life, yet there is a young man's freshness about it all. Toscanini had recently celebrated his 85th birthday, and yet the first movement is bright and breezy. He finds real grace in the Andante cantabile. Beethoven's nuances of scoring completely audible in this new restoration via Immortal Performances. The Menuetto is every inch the Scherzo here, full of energy, ready to explode at any moment (it is, in fairness, marked *Allegro molto e vivace*). However, Toscanini's way with the finale is certainly individual: hard-driven, so that gruff humor is not really a guest at the Maestro's table. There is much to admire in the excellence of ensemble, for sure, but this is the movement that fails the interpretation, treat though it is to be able to hear all the wind detail.

Ben Grauer's announcement gives a nice sense of place and time to the experience of the Ninth. It is the opening of the symphony that is so arresting, though: so clear, so pregnant with energy that its release seems inevitable. Toscanini is markedly unbending in this movement in this performance: one could, indeed interpret this as Toscanini hurling out this music "with an impact that no other living conductor could realise" (Robert Matthew-Walker in his notes); one has to admit there is a certain sense of setting one's sights on the end and not stopping for anything. Intriguingly, that very velocity pays huge dividends in the demonic Scherzo. It's fantastic to have

some body to the sound of the violins even when the music is fast and light, as here: Matthew-Walker points out Toscanini is faster than either Weingartner and Erich Kleiber in this movement. Here the Maestro's famed precision does pay huge dividends. Toscanini's tempo for the third movement seems perfect to me (Matthew-Walker thinks that "some may feel that Toscanini's tempo is on the fast side"), allowing the pastoral vein to shine; and how disciplined are the violins. The detail, again, is remarkable, but so is the fact that one can hear the bloom on the orchestra's sound.

The Ninth is split across discs, the finale appearing as the first track on the second disc. Some might feel this brings back an echo of changing LP sides! It is interesting to hear this finale after listening to the "bonus": that "bonus" is what remains of a rehearsal, just over 12 minutes' worth around the instrumental recitatives: it is clear here, as if one needed reminding, that Toscanini knew exactly what he wanted. It's interesting to hear the Maestro in discussion with a member of the orchestra, too, but in the performance itself everything makes crystal clear sense. Norman Scott's opening lines, prior to the first vocal statement of "Freude, schöne Götterfunken," are more accurately delivered than most, while the chorus and soloists appear miraculously clear in this transfer. (Scott is probably best known for his 17 seasons at the Met, although he also sang at Philadelphia Lyric Opera.) The sopranos of the Robert Shaw Chorale seem preternaturally equipped for their Herculean task leading up to "vor Gott." Of all tenor soloists in this piece (pretty much ever), Jan Peerce is one of the finest (he also appears on Immortal Performances 1079, with Bovy, Thorborg and Pinza). Again, the transfer allows remarkable amounts of detail around the louder passages (the choral "Seid Umschlungen, Millionen" and the final choral perorations). Immortal Performances has corrected a performance error early on in the symphony (an early horn entry in the opening measures).

When it comes to the Hess/Toscanini Beethoven Third Piano Concerto, the opening orchestral tutti is electric, the second subject on the winds hardly offering respite. Hess and Toscanini are on the same page interpretatively, and the Maestro is the perfect partner, absolutely with Hess to the split second. As is well known, Hess was at her best outside of the recording studio, and here is proof positive in a volcanic performance of the first movement. Dovetailing between piano and orchestra is superbly managed. The recorded piano sound has presence and body. Hess makes one of the best cases for Beethoven's own cadenza, finding a real spirit of exploration and downplaying any overt virtuosity.

It is fascinating to hear so much of the slow movement, be it Toscanini's luminous strings or Hess's pearly articulation and deeply-toned chords. Here Hess's imagination really takes off; many young pianists today could learn so much from her playing, her shadings, and her rapport with Toscanini. The finale is impeccably of Beethoven: the humor spiky, the grandeur beyond doubt. The transfer allows for the lower string 16th notes to register clearly (the same for Hess's left-hand contributions). There is a moment of instability about three minutes in, but such are the perils of live performance, and the electricity towards the end in the lead-in to the final Presto is undeniable.

Another vital part of the Toscanini jigsaw puzzle comes from Immortal Performances here. Once again, miracles have been achieved with the sound.