

BEETHOVEN Symphonies Nos. 6, 8, 9. Leonore Overture No. 3 • Arturo Toscanini, cond; Rosa Tentoni (sop); Rose Bampton (alt); Charles Kullman (ten); Ezio Pinza (bs); Schola Cantorum of New York; New York PSO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1104 (2 CDs: 150:56) Live: 12/3/1935, 3/8/1936, 4/26/1936

Review by Ken Meltzer

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A new release by the Immortal Performances label, in association with the Toscanini Estate, features 1935–36 broadcasts by Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic of compositions by Beethoven. All of the performances on this set represent the earliest recorded documents of Toscanini conducting the works in question. Toscanini first led the NY Philharmonic in 1926. For a period, Toscanini shared music director duties with Willem Mengelberg, the legendary conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam. In 1930, Toscanini became the sole music director, a position he held until 1936. In my review of the superb Immortal Performances release of Toscanini's Victor studio recordings with the NY Philharmonic (IPCD 1087-3) (41:2, Nov/Dec 2017), I discussed the value of these discs, vis-à-vis their more famous counterparts with the NBC Symphony Orchestra: "The Toscanini-NYPO recordings document a conductor at the height of his energy and powers and able to call upon the benefit of a lifetime of experience, leading one of the world's great ensembles, also at the peak of its artistry. To be sure, the attributes of Toscanini's famous NBC SO recordings are present here as well; the breathtaking precision of execution, a lyrical, singing tone, a magnificent grasp of a work's proportion and architecture, and perhaps above all, a stunning drive and momentum. But the NYPO recordings document a Toscanini far more willing to explore expansive tempos, as well as a liberal application of rubato, and even string portamento. Indeed, I often wonder how many who are unfamiliar with these recordings would first identify Toscanini as the conductor." To be sure, the NY Philharmonic studio recordings are of the utmost musical and historical value. But we should bear in mind that Toscanini, who began his conducting career in 1886, was always first and foremost a man of the theater and concert hall, not the recording studio. In order to gain a more complete understanding of Toscanini's craft, the ability to study his in-concert performances, including those with the NY Philharmonic, is a priceless gift. The new Immortal

Performances Beethoven set provides such a gift. In his Recording Notes for the new set, Richard Caniell discusses the challenges involved in restoring the source material, a challenge enhanced by broadcast engineers who often failed to capture an accurate, realistic, and detailed sound document. And to be sure, these 1935–36 broadcasts are far from the sonic equal of the magnificent Toscanini NY-Philharmonic studio recordings (1926, 1929–36). That said, Richard Caniell has done remarkable work to restore these off-the-air recordings (each more than 80 years old!) to a state that will provide great pleasure to any listener with a tolerance for historic sound documents.

The performances themselves, like the contemporaneous studio NY Philharmonic studio recordings, showcase a remarkable musical partnership. The opening *Leonore* No. 3, taken from an April 26, 1936 broadcast, is representative of the performances on this set as a whole. Toscanini adopts a broad tempo and flexible phrasing for the *Adagio* introduction, and elicits playing of remarkable lyricism and beauty. This, in turn, makes the ensuing *Allegro* all the more dramatic and impactful. And speaking of impact, the NY Philharmonic players under Toscanini achieves a sonority of far more warmth and depth throughout than do their NBC counterparts. As a result, Toscanini's monumental, razor-sharp attacks have a far greater (even visceral) impact in the NY Philharmonic performances featured here. Indeed, it is a singular thrill to hear an orchestra of such tonal richness and beauty play with this kind of hairpin precision. Even though the November 4, 1939 NBC broadcast of the *Leonore* No. 3 proceeds within similar parameters as the NY Philharmonic 1936 performance, it is the latter that (despite inferior recorded sound) repeatedly gives me goose bumps. The remaining performances are on a similarly grand level. The "Pastoral" Symphony, taken from a February 3, 1935 performance, strikes an ideal balance between the work's lyrical and more dramatic elements. Two years later, Toscanini made a famous HMV studio recording of the "Pastoral" with the BBC Symphony Orchestra (both versions omit the first movement's exposition repeat). The BBC recording is justly admired, but the 1935 NY Philharmonic performance strikes me as having an even freer and more flexible approach to phrasing. Perhaps this is a product of the latter's origin as a live concert. The remainder of the set features a complete March 8, 1936 Carnegie Hall program, including the Beethoven Eighth and Ninth Symphonies. The Eighth receives a brilliant performance, executed to perfection. Toscanini was perhaps the greatest interpreter of Verdi's operatic comic masterpiece, *Falstaff*. The Maestro

understood that in *Falstaff*, Verdi employed techniques previously found in his tragic works, but now to grand comic effect. So it is with the Beethoven Eighth, and once again Toscanini rises to the challenge. Every comic moment is savored to its utmost, but never at the expense of the work's overall momentum. In the Ninth, Toscanini contrasts blazing renditions of the first two movements with a third-movement *Adagio* that, taken at a relaxed tempo, and played with radiant tone, is arrestingly beautiful. As in the February 6, 1938 NBC Carnegie Hall performance of the Ninth (IPCD 1079-2), Toscanini emphasizes the dramatic (even operatic) conflict of the opening measures, setting the stage for the radiant "Ode to Joy" melody. The great Italian bass Ezio Pinza, in magnificent form, heralds the arrival of the vocal soloists. If the vocal quartet is not overall quite the equal of the 1938 NBC soloists, they acquit themselves admirably, as does the Schola Cantorum. This is a great performance of a work Toscanini adored and spent his entire life exploring, with the hope of doing it justice. There is a previous and quite excellent restoration of this 1936 Ninth by Pristine Audio (PASC117). The new Immortal Performances restoration strikes me as having a warmer, more transparent acoustic, and would be my first choice.

The March 8, 1936 concert includes broadcast commentary by Davidson Taylor. The accompanying booklet includes a thoughtful and eloquent essay by Robert Matthew-Walker on Toscanini and Beethoven, conductor John Sullivan's highly detailed and informative analysis of the recordings (with comparisons to other Toscanini versions), and Richard Caniell's aforementioned commentary. Toscanini's approach to conducting was in a lifelong state of constant self-reflection and evolution. If you are interested in exploring Toscanini's way with Beethoven during the 1930s, I think the 1939 NBC cycle (IPCD 1064-7), wonderful renditions in very fine sound, offers the marvelous starting point. The BBC studio recordings of the First, Fourth and Sixth Symphonies, and *Leonore* Overture No. 1, a live 1933 Beethoven Fifth with the NY Philharmonic, and that orchestra's 1936 studio recording of the Seventh also command attention. But the performances included on this Immortal Performances release offer a priceless window into the unique magic Toscanini and the NY Philharmonic achieved in this iconic repertoire, especially in live concert. If you are a devotee of Toscanini and/or historic recordings of Beethoven, this set is a must.

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Review by Colin Clarke

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The three symphony recordings here represent the earliest offerings of these scores from the maestro we have available. They show another side of Toscanini, a side that could even be described as reflective. The turbo-charged, tensile, but sometimes relentless performances of Beethoven and others later in his life, while they hold their place in the recorded canon, can seem unsatisfactory to all but the staunchest Toscanini fans (the “old band master” syndrome). It is good to have this well-engineered reminder of the back story: All performances are taken from Toscanini’s last two seasons as the New York PSO’s music director.

The set actually begins with the April 26, 1936 *Leonore* No. 3. Collectors will know the 1939 NBC performance, issued on 78s; this is an airborne performance. Detail is remarkable, as is unanimity of the strings (particularly the violins). We hear bass detail in this transfer to a remarkable degree. This performance was previously available on Guild Historical as well as from the Arturo Toscanini Society, but it has never been presented better than here. There is the odd pitch waver between 11 and 12 minutes in, but this remains a wonderful way to experience this powerful performance, powerful nowhere more so than in the coda, where discipline and white-hot tension meet.

The symphony recordings here all represent the earliest Toscanini versions we have. The Sixth Symphony, from February 1935, has some sonic problems (hiss can suddenly appear, disappear, then reappear) and the top frequencies in louder passages can appear silvery, but we do get to hear the vibrancy of Beethoven’s inner textures, which is to my ears at least this performance’s defining feature, along with that bracing quality Toscanini brought. The exposition repeat of the first movement is omitted (as it was in the BBC performance, but not elsewhere in his discography), but none of this should detract from the documentary value of actually having this performance available. The second movement flows wonderfully, so much so that it actually feels wrong to describe it as the “slow” movement (this despite the fact it is more spacious than others by this conductor); it holds the freshness of spring water, one might suggest. The woodwind contributions from the members of the New York PSO are characterful and an utter delight. Again, there is the odd moment when the music recesses,

but this comes with the territory, and one takes on trust by now that Immortal Performances have toiled long and hard. Consistency across Toscanini's performances is found in the third movement; in this performance he just avoids overdrive, though. What he excels in here is the organic, ongoing nature of the finale movement (sadly there is a rawness to the final chords). It is easy to hear the affection Toscanini held for the "Pastoral"; in his hands in this early performance it truly glows, it is fully alive.

And so on to the main meat of the offering, taken just over a year later: the "All-Beethoven Concert" of March 8, 1936. Here we have a spoken broadcast commentary (expertly done by Davidson Taylor) setting the atmosphere before the Eighth Symphony opens in a blaze of joy. We skip a note at 1:32 in the first movement, unfortunately, a result presumably of this transfer coming from a number of sources. The second movement is rather severe interpretatively, *pace* the odd endearing swoop of string portamento. We are closer to Beethoven's rough humor in the third movement; notable in recording / transfer terms is the amount of detail, in particular the truthful nature of the bassoon sound and the horns (the second horn solos seem particularly well served), while the finale scampers miraculously, cheekily including the odd *souçon* of portamento. If there are some sonic problems towards the end of the third minute, they do not seriously interfere with one's enjoyment. The booklet refers to this movement as "hilarious"; Toscanini is not such, at least not in a legs-in-the-air manner, but he is certainly bracing. While this Eighth has appeared previously on Dante (compact disc) and the Arturo Toscanini Society (LP), there is little doubt that the present transfer trumps all present pretenders to the throne.

Deriving entirely from a Toscanini Estate source, the Ninth could previously again be found on the Dante and ATS incarnations. This transfer offers full integrity though, striving to give us, the listeners, the full truth of this reading. Here the movement durations reflect the sense of space we have, at least within the context of Toscanini's output. He is even able to relax momentarily on occasion in the first movement, something which, in conjunction with his structural awareness, gives the reading a satisfying interpretative depth not always there when one pits Toscanini against some of the great Austro-Germanic maestros (mentioning no names, but one such's initials are W. F.). I agree with annotator John Sullivan's assertion that the Scherzo is one of Toscanini's best, if not the

best: Robert Matthew-Walker in his contribution refers to this as “like the observation of some superhuman energetic life-force.” Yes, the sound zooms hither and thither on occasion, and Richard Caniell is right to rail against the microphone placement and other problems he was presented with from his source material; and yet we hear, and are fully involved with, for example, Toscanini’s white-hot Scherzo.

When it comes to the slow movement, the sound suddenly seems to marry the performance in a ceremony that takes us to the Elysian Fields. Suddenly we hear the bloom on the strings, the magical, delicious dissonances between first and second violins, the subtle shadings of the phrases of the firsts, even the active horn parts, so vital in this movement. The soft-toned strings, beautifully revealed here, enable the listener to fully inhabit Toscanini’s reading in a way rarely encountered in the recordings of this particular maestro. There is a sudden shift in sound at 10:55 which is a tad disconcerting, but it is a small price to pay. The finale finds Toscanini giving the string recitatives great (and, to some, surprising) breathing space, so they seem to grow in power until the energy has to out, and it does so in the theme of the “Ode to Joy.” Yes, the sound at the opening is shrill, but Toscanini’s control over his forces is miraculous; the changes of tempo are realized with minute exactitude. Pinza is magnificent at his entry, the male members of the chorus lusty in their “Freude!” responses. The transfer enables all the woodwind counterpoint to Pinza’s statement of the main theme to count.

The four soloists are magnificently chosen: Hear how naturally they “add on” to one another when Beethoven layers one onto another prior to the choral climax at “vor Gott.” There is no added percussion in the tenor’s march (none audible, at least, but there is precedent for the removal); we do, though, certainly hear cymbals crashing towards the end of the movement. Kullman is at his best here, encompassing the upper reaches with ease and always delivering with sure tone. The chorus comes across generally well, one noisy passage in track 7 notwithstanding, while the ensemble of soloists reveal Toscanini’s exquisite choice of personnel, the solo quartet passages magnificently balanced (better than many modern recordings manage, in fact). We also hear a remarkable amount of detail in the finale’s coda, and yet it loses none of its culminatory power.

Robert Matthew-Walker’s notes are a model of concision and insight; John Sullivan’s are something of a *magnum opus* that require some stamina on

the part of the reader, although in fairness that might be the author fulfilling his commission rather than a naturally verbose demeanor. Let your ears decide, anyway. That these performances are available in such restorations is a major step forward in honoring Toscanini's legacy.