

TOSCANINI
The Complete NBC Concert of 23 October 1948
Brahms Cycle
Serenade No.1
Piano Concerto No. 2 In B-Flat Major
(Horowitz)
The Song Of The Fates

And

RARE AND UNKNOWN RECORDINGS
1933 Vienna Philharmonic - Brahms Symphony No. 3
Vienna 1934 Siegfried Funeral Music - 1938 Palestine
Symphony Schubert Symphony No. 9 (Scherzo) - Lucerne Festival 1939
Scarlatti Tommasini Ballet and bonus Fidelio aria (Lehmann) 1936.

**These premiere recordings in acceptable sound derive from
the Toscanini Estate.**

- IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1128-2 (2 CDs: 143:45)

Review by Ken Meltzer
March/ April 2020 Fanfare Magazine

Another collection of Toscanini treasures from Immortal Performances and Richard Caniell, comprising selections from the Maestro's broadcast 1948 Brahms cycle with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, and rare performance recordings from the 1930s. Disc one opens with the October 23, 1948 broadcast. First is the opening movement of the Brahms First Orchestral Serenade. There is a great deal to enjoy in this performance and indeed; it leaves one wishing that there could have been time to present this marvelous work in its entirety. Toscanini adopts a brisk tempo and secures marvelously lively and incisive playing from the NBC SO. The chirping woodwind interjections in the development section are a special delight, but overall, Toscanini and the Orchestra are successful in conveying the youthful exuberance of this work. Here, Toscanini applies a minimal amount of rubato. It might be tempting to conclude that this emblematic of the conductor's more straightforward approach in the final years of his life, especially in comparison to recorded evidence from the 1920s and 30s. But the ensuing Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2 is notable for its flexibility of pulse, with Toscanini and the NBC SO remaining step for step with the work's soloist. And that soloist is Vladimir Horowitz, in his most imposing form. In the first two movements, Horowitz adopts an intensity of concept and execution that verges on the demonic. In addition to his blazing technical prowess, Horowitz attacks the keyboard with a vigor that threatens to shatter the instrument, but still manages never to lapse into an unattractive sound. Mariss Jansons once told me that he was physically intimidated to be on stage when Sviatoslav Richter played, such was the power, focus, and intensity of the Russian virtuoso's playing. I doubt Toscanini was afraid of any musician, including Horowitz, but he had to be impressed with this almost superhuman execution. No wonder the

audience erupts into applause after each of the first two movements. Brahms's friend, Theodor Billroth, famously characterized the Second Piano Concerto v. the First as "that of the grown man to the youth". But in Horowitz's and Toscanini's conception, this is a grown man full of passion, vigor, and the willingness to confront all obstacles. And then, just as Brahms changes course in the third movement, so Horowitz adopts a lyricism and tenderness of phrasing that reminds us of another aspect of this pianist's magic. Likewise, the finale has all the deftness, humor, sparkle that one could hope for. A magnificent performance, and a great historical document. The first disc concludes with the November 27, 1948 broadcast of Brahms's final choral work, *Gesang der Parzen* (*Song of the Fates*), based upon poetry by Goethe. Brahms's highly dramatic and expressive setting of man's struggles in the face of the god's indifference was tailor-made for Toscanini's strengths; he was, after all, a great interpreter both of the music of Brahms, and of opera. Toscanini shapes the music in a manner notable for its intensity, and rich, mellow orchestral sound, with the bass line afforded gratifying presence. The Robert Shaw Chorale sings with characteristic warm, focused tone, unanimity of attack, and crystal-clear diction. All of the performances on the first disc are restored by Richard Caniell in fine sound, competitive with commercial recordings of the time, and displaying a warm orchestral sonority not always associated with Studio 8-H broadcasts. Ben Grauer's broadcast commentary is, as always, a welcome presence.

The recorded sound for the works featured on the second disc does not begin to approach that of the 1948 Brahms selections. But the recordings are no less important or treasurable for that. They are all documents of Toscanini in performance during the 1930s with great orchestras. An October 29, 1933 Brahms Third with the Vienna Philharmonic opens the disc. It is an extraordinary performance, marked by a richness of tone, spaciousness of phrasing, and intensity of expression that I have found in few renditions of this work. Once again, Toscanini elicits a warm, singing quality from this great orchestra, ravishing string portamentos, and the bass line afforded gratifying prominence. Typical of Toscanini performances of this period, he adopts a striking flexibility in his phrasing, and a wide dynamic range, with a willingness to explore sonorities at each end. In the finale, Toscanini and the Vienna Phil emphasize the forceful, dramatic aspects of the music, setting up the final coda, played with rapt, hushed phrasing, and a breathtakingly expansive tempo. There are some gaps in the performance recording, and so Richard Caniell filled them in with the appropriate portions of the Toscanini NY Phil 1935 performance (previously restored in marvelous fashion by IP). Toscanini's interpretive approach in both performances is similar, and Caniell's matching of the two source recordings is unobtrusive. Next is a 1934 Toscanini-Vienna Phil "Siegfried's Funeral Music from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. Again, this is a performance of remarkable and unique stature. The approach is broadly paced, with glorious playing by the Vienna Phil. Toscanini, a master dramatist, builds the tension of the music to an almost unbearable pitch, making the climaxes overwhelming in impact. But the performance also exudes a warmth and humanity that sometimes eludes interpreters of this work. In both the Brahms and the Wagner (indeed on the entire second disc), the sound quality is inferior to commercial recordings of the time, and even some broadcasts of the era. But

Richard Caniell has done painstaking and admirable work on the source materials. The result is that despite the sonic deficiencies, the glory of the music and its interpretation shines through. If you are a veteran of historic recordings, you will have no trouble enjoying these restorations. And I think enjoyment will even extend to those who may expect more modern sound, but are willing to be adventurous. A brisk and incisive performance of the third movement of the Schubert Ninth (it stops at the trio portion), from a April 20, 1938 concert with the Palestine (later, Israel) Philharmonic is an interesting souvenir (it is Toscanini's only recorded document with this orchestra). Likewise, an August 29, 1939 concert with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra provides a deft and charming performance of Vincenzo Tommassini's ballet based upon music by Domenico Scarlatti, *The Good-Humoured Ladies*. The final excerpt, Leonore's "Abscheulicher!" from Beethoven's *Fidelio* is taken from a July 25, 1936 performance at the Salzburg Festival of the complete opera. The sound is the most compromised of any of the excerpts on this disc. And yet, Richard Caniell has once again worked his magic so that we can enjoy the collaboration of Toscanini and Lotte Lehmann, who is, perhaps not surprisingly, the most feminine, three-dimensional, and radiant of Leonores. Toscanini and Lehmann work marvelously together, and the Maestro generously allows the great soprano all the time and space she needs to sing the music in the best and most expressive manner.

Robert Matthew-Walker's beautifully-written and informative essay joins Richard Caniell's "Recording Notes", along with a biography of Horowitz. The German text and English translation of the *Gesang der Parzen* are also part of the booklet. The sonic challenges of the second disc will probably make this release more of a specialist acquisition. But it contains some jewels beyond compare, restored in a manner that allows the listener the opportunity to enjoy their unique magic. And the first disc is grand in every respect, musically and sonically. Highly recommended.

5 Stars: Riveting Brahms from Toscanini and Horowitz in 1948, and glorious, rare 1930s recordings with the Italian Maestro.

Review by Colin Clarke
March/ April 2020 Fanfare magazine

Toscanini's affection and respect for Brahms resulted in a number of "Brahms Festivals," the first of which took place in 1935 with the New York orchestra. Then came 1942-43 with the NBC Symphony, and this present offering from the 1948-49 NBC season.

The first movement only of the Brahms op. 11 Serenade was performed on October 23, 1948, Toscanini taking to heart the "molto" part of the *Allegro molto*, but to good effect. The drone plus the piping all adds to a bucolic atmosphere, while the music positively glows. How lovely to hear that glow, too, in Richard Caniell's new remastering. Detail is superb, and there is no harshness to the

upper strings (at least, as auditioned via top-end headphones). Toscanini gives the music just the right amount of give-and-take, and the music softens gloriously. It is a simply magnificent performance, the only slight fly in the ointment being the immediate appearance of applause by the evidently very keen and impressed audience.

The Horowitz/Toscanini Brahms Second Piano Concerto finds the orchestra in top form, with Toscanini finding the perfect sense of flow. In the present transfer, one can hear a huge amount of internal (mid-range) detail, which allows the harmonic tensions to register with hitherto unheard-of force. This is one of several Horowitz/Toscanini Brahms Seconds (collectors will doubtless know the 1939 NBC Lucerne, and the two from May 1940—May 9 being by far the most released). The sheer unstoppable force of the second movement *Allegro appassionato* is as remarkable as the presence of the piano sound. For once, we can hear Horowitz the magician face-on. His gradation of tone is surely unparalleled, except within his own set of performances; and his placement of the apexes of those treble descents around the five-minute mark has never shone so brightly as here. And how Toscanini knows how to react, with quicksilver speed. Applause after this second movement is retained; on this side of the Pond (the not-so-splendidly isolated UK side), inter-movement applause seems to be becoming increasingly prevalent, so it is interesting to hear in this context, all those years ago. The recording for the *Andante* again allows felicities to come through so we hear Brahms's magnificent part-writing and, as an added bonus, the oboe comes through full-toned, not hopelessly reedy. Wind chords glow in the background of unfolding piano ascents, and it is at moments such as those that one really appreciates just how quiet the background is; it only becomes noticeable if one consciously decides to find it. Again, in the finale, we hear the strings far more than so often against the initial piano statement. Those moments where traditionally in historical performances one dreads the entrance of loud high strings here just sound part of the musical argument: and what an argument it is, with Horowitz finding magically even scales and a sound that is just huge. With this release, Immortal Performances has revived two major Brahms Second Concertos, the other being Casadesu with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York in the concert of February 2, 1936 (reviewed by myself in *Fanfare* 38:6); the two performances are magnificently complementary, and one should ideally audition both.

Brahms's last work for chorus and orchestra (1882), the *Gesang der Parzen* (Song of the Fates) appears in the manner of a "bonus." It is awe-inspiring, impeccably conveying the Austro-Germanic heart of this great work; it contains great beauty, too. It acts as a reminder of Toscanini's greatness as a choral conductor, as well as reminding us of the 1935 *Deutsches Requiem* Immortal Performances released with Rethberg and Schorr, a set that included another Horowitz Brahms Second Concerto from Lucerne (in terms of the two Brahms Seconds, one really should own both). The text is included for this work.

The second disc is entitled "Rare and Unusual Recordings" and brings a rare Brahms Third with the Vienna Philharmonic. The Toscanini Estate hoped Caniell could rescue it, by all accounts. He has done far more than just provide a serviceable listen: If the detail here is not quite what we hear on the first disc, there is an admirable amount. The sheer fire of Toscanini's reading comes through, the exposition repeat bringing fire and brimstone with it, a true

recontextualizing of the opening. The Vienna Philharmonic is in top form. There were several small gaps that Caniell filled with the New York 1935 Brahms Third. Like myself, you might do a double-take at the recording date (October 1933). The *Andante* is perfectly paced, a voyage into dark Brahmanian forests, Toscanini making the most of the Vienna sound while maintaining textural lucidity. The next movement is defined by its lyricism, and if in the finale Toscanini takes allows some light, he soon whips it away again; the journey to the radiant, peaceful close is a hard-fought one. This is one of the most determined, powerful Thirds out there; anyone who considers the Third as a lighter Brahms symphony needs to hear this as a corrective.

Given the power of this Brahms Third, the arrival of Siegfried's Funeral Music thereafter seems only logical. The music glowers darkly. This performance might be familiar to collectors, as it has been released by a variety of labels previously, but that hardly diminishes its power. Here, the shattering climaxes occur in a transfer that can absolutely contain their elemental power. You may find you need a break afterwards.

All of this nestles here with the first-ever release of the Palestine Symphony performance in a movement from the Schubert "Great" Symphony. Yes, the string octaves at the opening are somewhat muffled, but Schubert has ever enjoyed such an injection of magic fire? Listen to how Toscanini hears the music in small units to build tension within Schubert's overarching structure.

The Tommasini/Scarlatti is an orchestration of keyboard works from Domenico Scarlatti's output by Vincenzo Tommasini, performed here with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. Delightful it is, too (Toscanini plays four of the six movements). The *Andante* is a reservoir of peace, and the transfer enables us to hear the sheen on the strings, as well as the detail Toscanini could elicit from them. Grace suffuses the *Tempo di Ballo*; the oboe again emerges remarkably well. And what discipline the strings show in the finale. One does not need to read that the tempo is *Presto* to know it. Bright and breezy yet impeccable, this is a terrific way to close the Suite.

Finally, back to some Austro-Germanic repertoire for Lotte Lehmann and Salzburg in a 1936 aria from *Fidelio*. It is clear Caniell has done everything humanly possible to bring this important document back to us. Still, there is no denying the sonics require a significant adjustment from the listener. As the aria unfolds, though, one is increasingly led to Lehmann's mastery, every phrase heartfelt (and even a little extra flourish as her final gesture).

This is a magnificent set, generously filled; a clear labor of love, it is required listening for any Toscanini enthusiast.

