

TOSCANINI
NBC Symphony Orchestra
Complete Concert 1 November 1952

Johannes Brahms
Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90

Richard Strauss:
Till Eulenspiegel lustige Streiche, Op. 28

Bonus
Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a
Concert of 20 November 1948

Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York
1935 Brahms Cycle

Brahms: Symphony No. 2 in D Major, op. 73
Concert of 24 February 1935

Bonus
Brahms: SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN F MAJOR, OP. 90
Concert of 17 March 1935

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1126-2 (2 CDs: 152:33)

Review by Ken Meltzer
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On November 1, 1952 at New York's Carnegie Hall, Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra opened their broadcast season with a concert that included the Brahms Third Symphony and Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. Three days later, the same artists returned to Carnegie Hall to make commercial recordings of the Brahms and Strauss for RCA. Both recordings are a treasured part of the Toscanini discography, and justifiably so. Richard Caniell was among the members of the Carnegie Hall audience for the November 1, 1952 concert. And now, 67 years later, Caniell shares that unforgettable experience with us, in the form of Immortal Performances' restorations of the broadcast. Of course, comparisons between the November 1 live performances and November 4 studio recordings are inevitable. It is fair to say that the general outlines of

the performances and subsequent recordings are similar. But as it turns out, it is the broadcast that offers far better sound. The RCA studio releases are certainly not poor, but they are afflicted with a rather cramped and boxy acoustic, and some harshness and overloading in louder passages. All of those shortcomings disappear in the broadcast, at least as restored by Caniell and IP. The sound is quite beautiful; rich, with a striking blend of instrumental voices, exquisite detail, and a real sense of a performance taking place in a first-rate concert space. Of course, a lot of credit for the beautiful sonics must go to Toscanini and the NBC SO. But then again, the parallel RCA studio release does not show them in a similarly positive light. Indeed, the excellent sound on these broadcast performances reveals a beauty in the playing of the NBC SO not always apparent in their RCA discs. In the liner notes, there is mention that both Toscanini and the musicians were thrilled with the 1952 concert Brahms Third, acclaiming it as their best collaboration ever in this masterpiece. It is a radiant performance. Toscanini favors spacious tempos (the first movement exposition repeat is observed), and throughout draws a lovely, singing tone from the orchestra. There is an admirable flexibility in the phrasing, and, from time to time, a delightful hint of string portamentos. I don't want to give the impression that this performance lacks the requisite fire when called for, as in the first movement's development section, or much of the finale. But the overall impression is of a nostalgic, autumnal view of this masterpiece, perhaps not surprising, given that Toscanini was 85 at the time of the performance. But there are plenty of other contemporaneous Toscanini interpretations that are hair-raising in their intensity and energy. In this Brahms Third, Toscanini gives us a very personal, and achingly beautiful account of a work that meant so much to him. The improvement in sound benefits the concert performance of *Till Eulenspiegel* as well. Once again, Toscanini takes a relaxed approach to many of the more lyrical episodes. But the rambunctious energy and helter-skelter nature of the more manic episodes are played to the hilt, executed with the kind of razor-sharp precision Toscanini demanded of his musicians. And the Maestro who was the greatest interpreter of Verdi's final (and comic) opera, *Falstaff*, mines the humor of Strauss's prankster from start to finish. The November 1, 1952 Brahms Third and Strauss *Till* are priceless documents of the Toscanini-NBC collaboration, and a must, even if you already own the November 4 studio recordings. The first disc on this IP set concludes with a November 20, 1948 NBC broadcast of Brahms *Haydn* Variations. If the sound and rendition

are not quite on the exalted level of the November 1, 1952 performances, that is more a comment on the unique strengths of the latter. Toscanini masterfully paces and delineates the variations, building the music inexorably to its glorious conclusion. And once again, the NBC SO is in top form.

The second disc comprises performances by Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic of the Brahms Second and Third Symphonies, part of their 1935 Brahms cycle (the discs are provided by the Toscanini estate). In fact, the inclusion of these Symphonies brings IP's presentation of that cycle to its completion. It's not surprising that the sound on these performances does not begin to approach that of the set's first disc. And in truth, neither does the sound equal commercial recordings of that era; certainly not that of contemporaneous studio discs by Toscanini and the NY Phil (beautifully restored by IP in a prior set). But Caniell's masterful restorations allow us to listen to, evaluate, and savor, live broadcast performances that are now more than 80 years old. It's a miracle that such recordings are available at all, much less in acceptable sound. But the performances that constitute the true miracle. The Toscanini-NY Phil association was one of the greatest in orchestral history, and these performances find the artists in top form. The beautiful singing tone and unanimity and precision of execution Toscanini elicits from the NY Phil are emblematic of the Maestro's work throughout his career. What these recordings document is a conductor who took a much freer approach to his music-making, one that gives the impression of a more improvisatory view of performance, even if that was in reality the result of painstaking thought and rehearsal. The liberal use of rubato and portamento will come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with Toscanini's pre-NBC legacy. In fact, I wonder how many would, in a "blindfolded" listening, identify Toscanini as the conductor. These are majestic performances steeped in the Romantic tradition, gloriously executed by one of the world's finest ensembles. The finale of the Brahms Second broadcast of February 24, 1935, was lost, and so IP substitutes the same artists' performance of that music from a broadcast of February 16, 1936. There is no perceptible difference in the sound or approach to performance in the finale from what preceded it. In the NY Phil Brahms Third of March 17, 1935, Toscanini favors quicker tempos and a more propulsive approach to the music than in the 1952 concert. But those fleeter tempos serve as the foundation for music-making of far greater freedom and flexibility than in the later rendition. Like the 1952 Brahms Third, it is

a great performance, albeit a very different one. I can't imagine Toscanini fans wanting to be without either. A couple of bits of housekeeping. In the 1935 performances, Toscanini observes the first movement exposition repeat in the Brahms Third, but not in the Second. This issue of the 1935 Brahms Third marks the second of this performance by IP. Richard Caniell mentions in the recording notes that the sonics here constitute an improvement over the prior release. I have not heard the previous issue, but the current one is impressive for its vintage. Finally, it's worth noting that the 1935 Carnegie Hall audience applauds at the conclusion of the first and second movements of the Brahms Third. Food for thought for those of us believe nowadays that such a response is an unforgivable break with tradition!

The inclusion of announcer comments (Ben Grauer for the 1948 and 52 broadcasts) is a welcome addition. Robert Matthew-Walker provides yet another superb set of liner notes, along with Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. It's clear from the latter that Caniell takes special excitement and pride in this release, one that allows him to share an unforgettable moment in his life, as well as the legacy of one of his most beloved artists, with IP's patrons. I certainly am grateful, and I suspect you will be, too.

Ken Meltzer

5 Stars: Magnificent Toscanini Brahms and *Till Eulenspiegel* from Immortal Performances