

TOSCANINI: Concerts of 1 April 1945 and 27 October 1946 IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1165-2 mono (2 CDs: 2:08:15) Live: New York, 4/1/1945, 10/27/1946. London, 6/5/1935

TOSCANINI

NBC Concert – 1 April 1945

ORFEO ED EURIDICE, ACT II

Orfeo (Nan Merriman); Euridice (Edna Phillips)

NBC Mixed Chorus / Peter Wilkousky

Broadcast of 1 April 1945

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BACH: ST. MATTHEW PASSION: FINAL CHORUS

GLUCK: ORFEO ED EURIDICE: DANCE OF THE BLESSED SPIRITS

RCA Victor No. 12-3301B (1946)

TOSCANINI

NBC Concert – 27 October 1946

WAGNER: EINE FAUST OVERTURE

BERLIOZ: HAROLD IN ITALY

Bonus:

WAGNER: EINE FAUST OVERTURE

BBC Symphony / Toscanini

5 June 1935 - 2 EA 7216/17/18

Ken Meltzer

FANFARE March / April 2022

Immortal Performances (IP) continues its laudable conservation and celebration of the legacy of Arturo Toscanini with a two-disc set comprising a pair of complete NBC SO broadcasts from Studio 8H, along with a BBC SO bonus. First is the April 1, 1945 broadcast of Act II of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. *Orfeo* was a work very close to Toscanini's heart and conducting repertoire. He led Gluck's pathbreaking opera on several occasions, including numerous performances at the Metropolitan Opera. The first of the Toscanini Met *Orfeos* took place on December 23, 1909, starring Louise Homer and Johanna Gadschi in the title roles. The online Metropolitan Opera Archives include an excerpt from the program book for that performance. For those who subscribe to the dictum that Toscanini viewed the composer's score as gospel, subject neither to the performing artists' deviations or interpretive whims, the enumeration of the conductor's wholesale changes will make for interesting reading.

Act II as performed in the April 1, 1945 broadcast contains no such revisions, save for some retouching of Gluck's orchestration (in his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell discusses the inclusion of a gong in the music associated with the Furies). The performance is a fascinating document, and a compelling realization of Gluck's score. Toscanini and the NBC SO performed this work again in November of 1952, with Nan

Merriman reprising the role of Orfeo, Barbara Gibson as Euridice, and the Robert Shaw Chorale. That performance (from Carnegie Hall) proceeds along similar lines to the 1945 broadcast. But in the 1945 broadcast, Toscanini adopts a broader overall approach to pacing, and to my ears, all for the better. This is an interpretation of great contrasts. Toscanini emphasizes the play of shade and light that permeates Orpheus's visit to Hades and the Elysian Fields. Most obvious and striking is Toscanini's juxtaposition of the *Dance of the Furies* with the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*. The former has an energy and appropriately demonic force that is spellbinding. The *Dance of the Blessed Spirits* radiates a state of repose and tranquil beauty. No doubt a great deal of rehearsal time was spent to achieve this theatrical coup. Under Toscanini's leadership, Nan Merriman, a superb artist, sings an Orfeo who strikes a keen balance between nobility of declamation and full communication of the character's desperate plight. Merriman's diction is of the utmost clarity, and her phrasing is imbued with meaning and emotion. Toscanini shapes Orfeo's music with a flexibility of phrasing that emphasizes the humanity of the mythic character. Edna Phillips is a bright-voiced Euridice, who also sings with beauty and refinement in her brief appearance. The NBC Mixed Chorus fully embraces its dual role of underworld and blessed spirits. This is a red-blooded interpretation of Gluck's *Orfeo* that may not please those who prefer an HIP approach, but one I find entirely convincing both on a musical and dramatic level. The Chorus also delivers a heartfelt rendition of the conclusion of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, here sung in English. The recorded sound perhaps suffers a bit from congestion in the loudest passages, but overall, it has detail and warmth that reflecting IP's superb restorative work with problematic 8H source material. As an appendix to the first disc, IP includes a beautiful restoration of Toscanini and the NBC SO's 1946 RCA recording of the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*.

The October 27, 1946 broadcast was Toscanini's first with the NBC SO, following the Maestro's return from Italy, where he conducted the reopening of Milan's Teatro alla Scala. The broadcast receives here its world premiere release on disc. The concert begins with Wagner's *A Faust Overture*. Once again, Toscanini adopts slower tempos than may be heard in some of his other performances of the score. Toscanini elicits a marvelous glowing sonority from the Orchestra, as well as whiplash execution. This is a thrilling rendition that celebrates Wagner's striking contrasts of mood and color. Likewise thrilling is the ensuing *Harold in Italy*, with violist William Primrose as soloist. It's wonderful to hear the NBC SO, under Toscanini's leadership, shift its sonority from a warm Germanic timbre for the Wagner, to a more lean and transparent approach for the Berlioz. It's a testament both to a conductor and ensemble almost a decade into their collaborative partnership. Toscanini, a superb Berlioz interpreter, leads a performance that has a marvelous and inevitable sense of pacing. Toscanini doesn't rush the proceeding, but the music has ample momentum throughout, culminating in a tempestuous account of the *Orgy of the Brigands*. William Primrose is a magnificent soloist, playing with a rich, focused tone, and an arresting vision of the work's unfolding narrative. He strikes just the right balance between elegance, proportion, and romantic ardor that is at the heart of Berlioz's music. I think anyone who loves Berlioz's *Harold in*

Italy will want to hear this performance. Once again, IP has done an impressive job with the source material, allowing the beauty, subtlety, and impact to shine through. The second disc concludes with another performance of Wagner's *A Faust Overture*, this one from 1935, with Toscanini conducting the BBC SO. It's an interpretation similar in approach and execution to the 1945 NBC rendition, which is to say, very impressive. The recording perspective of the BBC version offers more of a sense of a warm concert hall ambience than the 1945 NBC SO, but one that is perhaps slightly more distant, too. Certainly a performance well worth hearing.

The two NBC SO broadcasts include announcer commentary. Robert Matthew-Walker's insightful commentary and Richard Caniell's informative Recording Notes grace the booklet, along with artist bios. A synopsis of Act II of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* is also included. All told, this is a marvelous collection of first-rate performances that are among the treasure of the Toscanini-NBC SO legacy. How wonderful, too that in the progression of this set, the Gluck prefaces works by Wagner and Berlioz. Both of those Romantic composers were highly influenced by their Classical-era predecessor's operatic reforms (Berlioz created his own performing version of Gluck's *Orfeo*). And I think the polished and intense performances on this release bring that musical lineage into full relief. Enthusiastically recommended.

5 stars: From Immortal Performances, two superb Toscanini/NBC SO broadcasts

TOSCANINI: Concerts of 1 April 1945 and 27 October 1946

Colin Clarke
FANFARE March / April 2022

This is the complete concert of April 1, 1945. Toscanini had already conducted Gluck's *Orfeo* at the Met and La Scala, and here we have a performance of the second act with Nan Merriman and Edna Phillips. It's a fierce opening chorus, as one might expect. The whole thing is driven—no surprise, coming from Toscanini—but an approach that suits the music here, as the second act is the one in which Orfeus enters Hades and meets the Furies. There remains some sense of distortion, but it is minimal.

We are, it has to be said, very lucky to have this alternative at all, and Immortal Performances have done another great service to music in fleshing out the Toscanini discography. Also, it has to be said that this is far from the worst Studio 8H recording I have heard; in fact, there are times when the orchestral bite is positively enhanced (track 5, which includes a gong added by Toscanini). There is also a gossamer lightness to the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits," and a grace that is remarkable. Its emotive power actually lies in Toscanini's skill with the inner lines, which add layer upon layer to Gluck's magical (and universally famous) melody. Edna Phillips's "Questo asilo ameno e grato"

is actually quite lovely up top. We quite clearly hear Toscanini singing along just before one of the choral entrances. Orfeo's "Che puro ciel" is really light and even stylish—graceful, certainly. Merriman is strong in "Deh! Placaveti con me!". The NBC Mixed Chorus does a splendid job thanks, in great part surely to chorus master Peter Wilkousky.

Many will be familiar with the performance of act II that appeared on RCA with Merriman also, but joined by Barbara Gibson on that occasion. It is from here, recorded in January 1945, that the second "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" hails. It is an expressive account from the solo flute, and it is nice to hear that Toscanini understands the harmonic framework. Comparing the Immortal Performances version with RCA's Arturo Toscanini Collection finds the latter with a warmer sound, but there is far more detail audible in the Immortal Performances version.

In between is an unbelievably stodgy, turgid, sloth-like final chorus from Bach's Matthäus- Passion. Little survives, sadly, of Bach in this soggy, damp dishcloth of a performance. As a syrupy violin slide puts the final nail into Bach's coffin; one realizes there is nothing uplifting, nothing to see here. This is of historical interest only.

The second disc holds the Berlioz at the center, bookended by two performances of Wagner's A Faust Overture (written in 1839–40, this piece was originally intended to be the first movement of a symphony that was never completed). This was the first NBC Toscanini broadcast following the Maestro's return from Italy (where he conducted the reopening of La Scala). There are harmonic progressions here that are immediately of the Meister, while the choice of D Minor as key is perfect for the work's dramatic qualities. The 1946 performance heard here has plenty of give and take; the music wafts and wends its way beautifully and, most importantly, freshly. It is as if Toscanini and his NBC players were discovering this music for the first time. The performance breathes the air of early-mid Romanticism; Schumann and even Mendelssohn (those staccato woodwind passages, so effortlessly together here) are just a heartbeat away. The June 5, 1935 performance with the BBC Symphony is lean-limbed (we hear Toscanini's vocalizings a little more obviously, too), and the opening is perhaps even more mysterious than the 1946 NBC, the Allegro just a touch more impetuous. Immortal Performances have done wonders with the sonics; yes, this is an historical performance, but would one naturally guess 1935 for the date? I doubt it. This is the most expansive of the Toscanini Faust Overtures (listed as "2 EA 7216-8"). Both transfers, interestingly, allow for more detail to come through than the RCA Victor commercial recording (available on a RCA Red Seal compact disc of Wagner preludes, part of the Arturo Toscanini Collection).

It's fascinating to learn that at the time of broadcast there was only one recording of Berlioz's *Harold en Italie* available, and that was also with Primrose (Boston SO and Koussevitzky). As luck would have it, the piece is almost ringing in my ears after experiencing a magnificent account recently in Strasbourg, France with Timothy Ridout as solo violist, with the Strasbourg Philharmonic under John Nelson (10/13/2021 at the Salle Erasme). It was a visceral reminder of the power of this piece (and asked questions

as to why we do not hear it live more often; that was maybe only the third time I have heard it in concert). This 1946 transmission appears on disc for the first time (a performance of January 21, 1939 appeared on Music & Arts previously, also with Primrose). How Primrose's viola sings in that first statement of the *idée fixe*; and we hear the harp's arpeggiations perfectly. It remains astounding that the magic and presence of Primrose's pianissimos can retain such power after so many years. The sound has virtually zero surface noise, and not as a result of filtering that robs the music of life; it was naturally so. We also are able to hear maximal detail in the louder *tutti*s, but most of all it is the sheer life of this first movement ("Harold en Montaignes") that remains in the memory. The "Marche des pèlerins" is both beautiful and beautifully shaped; one is in a state of wonder at Berlioz's orchestration, and how vibrantly Toscanini realizes it. A special mention is due, perhaps, to the English horn player for his beautiful phrasing; and how wonderful to hear its tone rendered so well. The finale is an extraordinary journey, taut and focused from Toscanini and his orchestra, expressive and febrile from Primrose. Perhaps Toscanini holds back a little on the more extravagant moments in this movement, but it is for a larger structural purpose, gauging the climaxes perfectly. This is a fascinating set, with the music lovingly restored; it features the byways of Toscanini, if you will, and is all the more enjoyable for it.