

**MOZART** Overture to *Die Zauberflöte*, K 620. Divertimento No. 15 in B-flat Major, K 287. **Symphony No. 35** in D Major, “Haffner”, K 385. **KABALEVSKY** Overture to *Colas Breugnon*. **CHERUBINI** Symphony in D Major. **STRAUSS** *Tod und Verklärung*. & • Arturo Toscanini, cond; NBC SO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1147-3 (3 CDs: 223:08) Live: NBC Studio 8-H, NY 11/3/1946; Carnegie Hall, NY 3/8/1952

& Rehearsals of Mozart and Strauss

By Ken Meltzer

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“Toscanini: NBC Concerts and Rehearsals 1946 & 1952” is a new release from Immortal Performances. The set (three discs, priced as two) includes two complete Toscanini-NBC SO broadcasts. The first is an all-Mozart program from NBC’s Studio 8-H, broadcast on November 3, 1946. The second, broadcast from Carnegie Hall on March 8, 1952, comprises Kabalevsky’s *Colas Breugnon* Overture, Cherubini’s Symphony in D, and Richard Strauss’s tone poem, *Death and Transfiguration*. As I’ll note in this review, other Toscanini-NBC SO performances of the repertoire on these concert broadcasts have been released commercially by RCA. In the case of the Mozart “Haffner” Symphony, and Cherubini and Strauss works, the recordings were made in conjunction with the concerts featured here. But what sets this release apart are the lengthy and engrossing rehearsal sequences, affording a priceless window into Toscanini’s craft, and his relationship with the NBC SO. The November 3, 1946 all-Mozart program begins with the Overture to the opera *The Magic Flute*. Two other recordings of this work are included on the 72-volume “Arturo Toscanini: The Complete RCA Collection; BBC SO, June 2, 1938; NBC SO, November 26, 1949. All three are similar in concept, with Toscanini delineating a sharp contrast between the grandeur of the *Adagio* introduction and ensuing *Allegro*. Indeed, the introduction is taken at a strikingly broad tempo, enhancing the impact of the fleet principal section. My favorite among the three is the BBC recording, which has a special warmth and sonic glow. But all three are striking renditions. Following the *Magic Flute* Overture, Toscanini and the NBC SO perform Mozart’s Divertimento in B-flat, K 287. A recording of the work by the same artists from the following year (November 18, 1947) is part of the complete RCA Toscanini edition. Again, the artistic profile is consistent (in each, Toscanini omits the second of the work’s two minuets). The sound of the 1947 recording has a warmer quality and therefore, to my ears, reflects more of the work’s lightness and charm. But in each case, we hear Toscanini taking great care to wed precise execution with a glowing and lyrical orchestral sonority. It’s very clear in all of the performances on this concert (and in the ensuing rehearsal sequences) that Toscanini viewed Mozart as a robust musical voice, one not restricted by the proprieties of the Classical era. That concept is most clearly articulated in the program’s concluding work, the “Haffner” Symphony. The Complete Toscanini Edition includes a spring, 1929 recording with the NY Phil, and November 4, 1946 NBC SO recording. It’s not surprising that the November 3, 1946 broadcast, and the recording made the following day, are cut from the same cloth. But their contrast with the 1929 NY Phil version is of considerable interest. In that earlier recording, Toscanini favors broader tempos, and a flexibility of phrasing that one might associate more closely with the Romantic repertoire of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It’s a marvelous recording, and well worth hearing (there is a fine restoration by IP, part of its complete survey of the Toscanini-NY

Phil recordings). The 1946 broadcast and recording offer a far more propulsive and dynamic view of the score. They are thrilling accounts, but ones that still take the time to savor such moments of repose as the Symphony's second movement, and trio in the third movement minuet. I would not want to be without either Toscanini's 1929 or 1946 takes on the score. Richard Caniell has taken the problematic source material of the broadcast, and given us a thoroughly listenable and enjoyable experience, further enhanced by host Ben Grauer's commentary.

No such audio challenges attend the March 8, 1952 Carnegie Hall broadcast, sonically competitive with the parallel commercial recordings of the Cherubini and Strauss. Toscanini and the NBC SO recorded Kabalevsky's *Colas Breugnon* Overture on April 8, 1946. Both the 1946 recording and 1952 broadcast are superb performances; brilliantly executed, and brimming with energy and humor. But the sonics of the 1952 broadcast are noticeably superior in dynamic range, warmth, and detail, making the later *Colas Breugnon* a brief but treasurable acquisition. The March 10, 1952 recording of Luigi Cherubini's Symphony in D is justly famous. Toscanini invests all the preparation, musicianship, and passion he bestowed upon Beethoven's contemporaneous works. If the Cherubini D-Major is not quite in Beethoven's league, in the hands of Toscanini and the NBC-SO it emerges as a bracing, melodious, and convincing symphonic statement. The March 8 broadcast and March 10 recording are quite similar in outlook. While both took place in Carnegie Hall, the absence of an audience for the commercial recording results in a more resonant acoustic. As such, the two versions make for an interesting comparison. Toscanini recorded Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* twice. In addition to the March 10, 1952 NBC SO recording, there is a February 11, 1942 version with the Philadelphia Orchestra (again, beautifully restored in an IP release). Toscanini was not completely satisfied with the March 10, 1952 recording. As a result, a considerable amount of the March 8 broadcast was used to fashion a record that met with the Maestro's approval. And so, the differences between the broadcast and commercial recording are even less evident than in the Cherubini. In both the Philadelphia and NBC SO versions, Toscanini proves himself a master of Strauss's tone poem. Toscanini was, of course, one of the preeminent opera conductors of his generation. And Toscanini mines all of the dramatic potential of *Death and Transfiguration* to its fullest. In both the Philadelphia and NBC SO accounts, Toscanini elicits orchestral playing of arresting concentration and beauty. All told, the March 8, 1952 concert (again with Ben Grauer's announcements) is a thrilling experience. And both the 1946 and 1952 concerts are worthy supplements to the commercially-issued recordings of the same repertoire.

But for me, the finest treasures of this set may be found in the extended rehearsal sequences. IP includes the entire rehearsal of the Mozart *Magic Flute* Overture and "Haffner" Symphony. There is also a generous portion of the Strauss *Death and Transfiguration* rehearsal. All told, the set includes almost two hours of rehearsal material. Prior to receiving this IP set, I had heard several hours of Toscanini in rehearsal. The impression derived from the rehearsal sequences on this release is consistent with what I've previously experienced. Discussions of Toscanini's rehearsals quite often focus upon his legendary displays of temper. To be sure, they occurred with some frequency, and could be quite epic. My personal favorite is Toscanini's confrontation with the NBC SO's contrabasses, who repeatedly fail to play Amneris's entrance music in Verdi's *Aida* to the Maestro's satisfaction. After several volcanic eruptions, Toscanini admonishes the musicians: "Don't play from memory! You have no memory." The truth is, the displays of temper were far less common than one might be led to expect, and generally occurred only when Toscanini had exhausted other methods of conveying his point. For the far greater

part, Toscanini's rehearsals were all business, and very productive. Toscanini was not a conductor given to long explications about the music and its meaning. He preferred to let his musicians play as much as possible, stopping only when necessary to improve musical execution. And believe it or not, Toscanini was also capable of a joke well-timed and aimed, that served to reduce the tension. These are all qualities greatly appreciated by any professional orchestral musician. By the time of the 1946 rehearsal, Toscanini had been conducting the NBC SO for almost a decade. And it's clear in listening to that rehearsal (and of course, the 1952 Strauss rehearsal) that the conductor and orchestra understood each other very well, and what was needed by both to use their time together most efficiently. It's a marvelous gift to be able to hear these legendary artists collaborate, and to witness the fruits of that collaboration in the complete broadcasts. The accompanying booklet includes Richard Caniell's commentary on Toscanini in rehearsal, as well as his customary Recording Notes. Robert Matthew-Walker provides an extended and informative essay on the featured works and Toscanini's interpretations. I will add here that in 2003, Guild Historical issued the November 3, 1946 Mozart concert and rehearsal materials, also with Caniell restorations. The IP version offers superior sonics, with finer detail, and a far more pleasant (but no less impactful) acoustic in the louder passages. I think that all fans of Toscanini will want to hear this set, both for the fine broadcast performances, and the fascinating rehearsal sequences. They are a most valuable window into the legacy of a remarkable and commanding musician. Recommended.

Five stars: Treasurable documents of Toscanini in rehearsal and performance with the NBC SO

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Review by **Colin Clarke**

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When Arturo Toscanini hit gold, he was without peer. There is at least one instance of that in this set, an astonishing Strauss *Tod und Verklärung*; arguably, the Cherubini Symphony is up there, too. And then there is a whole disc of Mozart, with the curio of four movements from the K 287 Divertimento.

But first, there comes the Overture *Die Zauberflöte*, its opening decidedly heavy but with lots of transparency later on (which is what this piece needs, with its joy in the use of counterpoint). But there is a point to Toscanini's way with the famous beginning; creating such a chasm between the tempos makes the return of the opening chords later all the more arresting. The bass is nice and tight in the Overture's opening, too; an enlightening performance of an Enlightenment piece, one might say.

We hear four of the six movements of the Divertimento in B1 Major, K 287, of 1777. Scored for strings and two horns, it includes a part for solo violin (at the premiere played by the young Mozart) here played by the first violins en masse. Toscanini's approach is, rightly, completely different from *Die Zauberflöte*, the variations of the second movement particularly gracious. The high first violin part requires huge discipline for a string section and is played not only with complete unanimity, but also with true grace. There is a rollicking Menuetto and Trio, and while the Adagio has occasional slides, it still works convincingly. The finale should make us smile, though,

and this really does not. It is very disciplined, for sure, but the sense of play is minimized. The applause, though, is instantaneous. Time has mellowed my appreciation of Toscanini's reading of the Divertimento, although as you can see some caveats remain; when I reviewed this performance elsewhere in its Guild incarnation back in 2003, I referred to it as "for Toscanini die-hards only."

The "Haffner" Symphony is one of several by Toscanini. That inner detail I commented on in *Die Zauberflöte* is here again in the first movement development section. Occasionally, one can hear Toscanini himself, but how involving is the bustle of the finale (a close relation, here, to *Figaro*).

The rehearsal is recorded without much thought to levels, but one can hear Toscanini clearly. In rehearsal, he is focused, and obviously commands and demands attention. He rehearses string counterpoint in isolation, which underlines impressions above. You don't need to speak Italian for "per Dio santo"; as he gets all worked up. But most fascinatingly, if anything, the extended rehearsal segments are preferable to the actual performances themselves. The second disc comprises six tracks of rehearsal, continuing the Mozart Symphony plus *Die Zauberflöte*, with lots of care taken to fast string passagework, which certainly came through in the performances.

The third disc brings us Kabalevsky's riotous *Colas Breugnon* Overture and Cherubini's Symphony in D, followed by Richard Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung*. The Kabalevsky absolutely finds Toscanini and his orchestra in their element, the sense of circus jocularly all-pervasive even as one marvels at the string discipline. And the recording! Immortal Performances has created miracles, not only so that detail comes through but, importantly, that climaxes do not crowd.

It's fascinating to have Cherubini here; recorded after the concert, we are told, from 11:30 pm to 2 am for the RCA release. But here we have this terrific, powerful, broad-shouldered account, the first movement not a million miles from the atmosphere of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Perhaps one might want a little more give for the contrasting sections initially, although the players seem to relax towards the movement's end with some lovely woodwind contributions. Toscanini's structural discipline is noteworthy and, in tandem, his large-scale harmonic awareness gives the movement proper trajectory. The slow movement is a simply heavenly piece. Toscanini realizes this, shown by the way the phrases are shaped with infinite care. The sheer energy of the third movement is remarkable, as is the wind discipline in the Trio; and how well this comes across in terms of reproduced timbre in the transfer. Moreover, the celebratory nature of the finale is viscerally communicated; again, the recording allows the music's energy to flow unimpeded. It's interesting how this work appeared alongside the Strauss piece (and a couple of pieces by Busoni) when programmed by Toscanini's protégé Guido Cantelli in a program at Carnegie Hall with this orchestra on March 21, 1954 (to be found on a 2012 Pristine Audio transfer by the excellent Andrew Rose).

But it is the opening of Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* that promises so much. We hear the rhythmic pulsings as clearly as we hear the ominous bass shadows. The emergence of that glorious oboe melody against harp is perfectly judged, while the angst is positively Solti-like, except with greater control. This is the finest performance of all on the set; in terms of revelation it sits up there with the Toscanini Sibelius En saga from Immortal

Performances I reviewed in *Fanfare* 44:2 (*Toscanini conducts Verdi and Sibelius*). Of the three Toscanini performances of this piece on Immortal Performances I consider in this review, it takes the crown for its all-encompassing structural integrity coupled with its fiery energy.

In *Fanfare* 43:4, I went into detail about the differences between Immortal Performances' transfer of the Philadelphia Orchestra performance against RCA's release (*Victor Records Restored*; the performance dates from 1/12/1942), with the former triumphing by no small measure. Returning to it for comparison purposes here is a pleasure, not least for the reassuring hiss that heralds miracles within. Here, the beauty of the opening is surely without peer, and the propulsion towards climaxes of a similar intensity as the NBC, if arguably not quite equal (they can still leave one quite breathless).

There is also the Lucerne performance by the La Scala Symphony on 7/5/1946, a performance of great beauty (with an astonishing violin solo), and, if possible, with passions even more raw than in the 1952 performance under consideration here. More detail is audible in the present 1952 account, for sure; but I also find more majesty in this later account. Perhaps I should also add that reauditioning the RCA Red Seal Arturo Toscanini Volume 30 (which pits the recorded *Tod und Verklärung* with *Don Quixote*) found me quite underwhelmed in terms of the sound, which was substantially less involving; and the same pretty much goes for the RCA Philadelphia transfer (Volume 68, well coupled though with the astonishing 1942 Philadelphia Tchaikovsky "Pathétique"). All of the RCAs sound as if they need opening out after hearing the Immortal Performance transfers.

There is a recording of a rehearsal segment that follows that lasts around 20 minutes. One can hear Toscanini's insistence on the rhythms of the opening being exact; and (I heard this after reviewing the broadcast), it comes as no surprise that he highlights the contrabassoon as he balances the wind chords with such remarkable care. And off he goes: "O Madonna sante" he says when they don't do exactly what he asks. Languages mix (someone is "*sempre* late"), and there is a *huge* tantrum at "*diminuendo tutti*" with a flurry of Italianate shouting. It's great fun if you weren't there; and although this is behavior of yesteryear, we have to admit it got results.

Documentation included with the release is characteristically detailed, with recording notes by Richard Caniell plus an essay from the ever-eloquent Robert Matthew-Walker.

In terms of documentary value, this release is priceless. Musically, too, the performance of Strauss is a triumph, especially when heard in a restoration such as this. The offering of a window into Toscanini's rehearsal process is worth the price alone; don't skip it.