

TOSCANINI: Two Complete NBC Concerts - 1938 • Arturo Toscanini, cond; NBC SO •
IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1164-3 mono (3 CDs: 3:18:28) Live: New York, 1/29/1938,
11/5/38, 3/17/1945

TOSCANINI

NBC Concert – 29 January 1938

ROSSINI: OVERTURE TO LA SCALA DI SETA
SCHUMANN: SYMPHONY NO. 3 IN E FLAT, OP 97
PAGANINI: MOTO PERPETUO, OP 11
MUSSORGSKY: PICTURES OF AN EXHIBITION

TOSCANINI

NBC Concert – 5 November 1938

PAUL GRAENER: THE FLUTE OF SAN SOUCI
SAMUEL BARBER
Adagio for Strings (Premiere)
Essay for Orchestra (Premiere)
DEBUSSY: IBERIA
DVOŘÁK: SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN E MINOR, OP 95
(From the New World)

BONUS

SCHUMANN: SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN C MAJOR, OP 61
(NBC Concert – 17 March 1945)

Ken Meltzer

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A new release from Immortal Performances (IP) documents a pair of complete broadcast concerts by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC SO, both from the conductor's first two seasons with the Orchestra (1937-8, 1938-9). As a bonus, IP appends the March 17, 1945 Toscanini-NBC SO broadcast performance of the Schumann Symphony No. 2. This three-disc set is treasurable for many reasons. The second of the complete broadcasts (November 5, 1938) includes the world premiere performances of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, and First Essay for Orchestra. The broadcast and the exposure it afforded Barber marked an epic turning point in the young American composer's career. The IP set as a whole also provides snapshots of Toscanini's work prior to the 1940s and 50s; i.e., the period in which he made his most famous recordings. IP has been at the forefront of restoring Toscanini concert performances and studio recordings from the 1920s and 30s; principally with the New York Philharmonic, but also with the NBC SO and other orchestras as well. As I've had the opportunity to write on several occasions, those recordings document the work of a conductor whose interpretations frequently contrast with those of Toscanini's final years. Toscanini's recordings of the 1920s and 30s reveal a conductor far more inclined to adopt broader tempos, and a more pronounced application of rubato and portamento in his phrasing. I must emphasize that all of these qualities were aligned to the same discipline of ensemble that was a Toscanini trademark in his later years. I am a great admirer of Toscanini's entire recorded legacy. But I do believe that his earlier recordings are the ones that present the most gratifying confluence of Toscanini's interpretive and technical prowess.

The Overture to Rossini's *La scala di seta* that serves to open the January 29, 1938 broadcast (Toscanini's third with the NBC SO) is characterized by a delightful lilt and buoyancy. The ensuing rendition of the Schumann "Rhenish" Symphony has a spaciousness and flexibility of approach that belie the stereotype of a conductor who favored pressured, metronomic performances. And speaking of stereotypes, those who argue that Toscanini viewed the score as sacrosanct and not subject to personal deviation or indulgence, will need to reconcile the conductor's amendments to Schumann's original scoring in both the "Rhenish" and the Second Symphonies. This is a "Rhenish" that glows with Romantic fire and rich and beautiful orchestral playing. A scintillating performance of Paganini's *Moto perpetuo* serves as prelude to the concert's final work, the Ravel orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Once again, Toscanini often chooses spacious tempos, and he elicits rich-toned and incisive execution from the NBC SO (there are some precarious moments in the *Bydlo* tuba solo, and the muted first trumpet's contribution to *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*).

The first work on the November 5, 1938 broadcast is German composer Paul Graener's *Flute of Sans-Souci*. Toscanini and the NBC SO perform the neoclassical work with elegance and charm. The world premieres of the Barber *Adagio for Strings* and First Essay for Orchestra follow. Samuel Barber composed the first of his three Essays for Orchestra in response to a request from Toscanini, who was seeking to perform new American works with the NBC SO. Barber forwarded the First Essay and *Adagio* to Toscanini for his review. Toscanini later returned the scores to Barber, but without comment. Barber was certain that Toscanini had rejected his new compositions. In the summer of 1938, Gian-Carlo Menotti visited the Toscanini family at their Italian villa above Lake Maggiore. Upon his arrival, Toscanini asked Menotti why Barber had not joined him. Menotti replied that Barber was ill. Toscanini responded: "I don't believe that. He's mad at me. Tell him not to be mad. I'm not going to play one of his pieces, I'm going to play both." And that is precisely what Toscanini did as part of the November 5, 1938 concert. The *Adagio for Strings* benefits from a radiant performance. Toscanini coaxes gorgeous playing from the NBC SO strings, and the entire work proceeds as an unbroken, songful arch. Perhaps the First Essay's various strands and enigmatic close prove somewhat more elusive for the performers. But it is nonetheless a committed and energetic performance, and it is wonderful to hear the concert audience's warm embrace of the music and its creator, who was in attendance. Toscanini and the NBC SO relish the atmosphere, transparent, colorful orchestrations, and buoyant rhythms of Debussy's *Iberia*. A brilliant performance of the Dvořák "New World" Symphony brings the concert to a close. Toscanini achieves a masterful balance between the work's elements of dynamism and repose. It is a rendition that is teeming with energy, but never impresses as being rushed. Toscanini observes the first movement exposition repeat. The March 17, 1945 Schumann Second is a thrilling performance. Like the "Rhenish" included on this set, Toscanini's reading of the Second masterfully embodies Schumann's mercurial Romantic voice. Here, the quick-tempo movements exhibit more of the fleetness of tempos and straight-ahead intensity often associated with Toscanini. But they serve to frame a reading of the third movement *Adagio espressivo* that is broadly paced, and delicately articulated.

The sound of the January 29, 1938 broadcast is acceptable for the period, save for some congestion in louder passages of the Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures*. Any sonic defects do not preclude enjoyment of the performances. The sound of the November 5, 1938 broadcast is far better, with a depth, impact, and richness that approach studio recordings of the time. Given the historic importance of the Barber premieres, and the excellence of the Debussy and Dvořák, the sound on this IP release is a gift to be cherished. The Schumann Second likewise benefits from IP's excellent restoration. Robert Matthew-Walker's booklet commentary, as always, presents a wealth of information and insight, couched in admirable economy of expression. As a fascinating bonus to his customary Recording Notes, Caniell provides an in-depth, eyewitness analysis of the infamous acoustics of NBC's Studio 8H, as well as some other points of considerable historical interest. Broadcast commentary is included for the November 1938 performance, but not for the January. An important, compelling, and highly entertaining release, one I recommend with the utmost enthusiasm.

5 stars: Toscanini at the height of his powers in two 1938 NBC SO broadcasts

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NBC SO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1164-3 mono (3 CDs: 198:28)
Live: New York, 1/29/1938, 11/5/38, 3/17/1945

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What brilliant programming there is here. As Robert Matthew-Walker points out in his ever perceptive program notes, some pieces have their day and fall out of fashion, possibly to return one day, possibly not. One such is Paul Graener's *Flute of Sans-Souci*, a piece lucky to get a footnote anywhere today, but clearly of sufficient substance to find an ally in one Arturo Toscanini (it was published in 1930 by Eulenberg as *Die Flöte von Sanssouci*). We also have the world premieres of Barber's *Adagio for Strings* and *Essay for Orchestra*, to add to the documentary value of this set; some might say their inclusion makes purchase mandatory.

Richard Caniell used transcription discs that Walter Toscanini provided to Riverdale Radio (WUVR) for rebroadcast as part of a series on Toscanini's early years with the NBC Symphony. Caniell is candid about the sonics in his accompanying note, so much so that if one reads them first, the actual sound of the Rossini *La scala di seta* Overture comes as a pleasant surprise. Toscanini left a string of powerful opera performances behind him, and of course he was immersed in the Italian repertoire. Interestingly, in Studio 8H, Toscanini manages to conjure up all the expectation of the opera house when an overture is underway, as if this was prior to a full performance of Rossini's one-act "farsa comica." Woodwind chirrup infectiously, strings retort suavely, vocally. The detail one hears in this restoration supports Toscanini's vision.

Schumann's great "Rhenish" Symphony receives a vital performance. Brisk, to be sure, in the first movement, like a bracing walk along the Rhine, perhaps, but how the sforzati make their mark. Toscanini judged Schumann's orchestration with consummate expertise, and how wonderful one can hear the transparency he achieves. (I hardly need to remind Fanfare readers that Schumann's orchestration is the subject of some controversy, for years reviled, and also that alternative orchestrations of the Schumann symphonies exist by one Gustav Mahler.) Toscanini's tempo for the Nicht schnell second movement feels pretty "schnell" to me; this is the relentless Toscanini of repute, straining at the leash. One does have to admire the horn playing (a fine ascent to the high, sounding EJ from the NBC principal, with the whole section sounding beautifully balanced). One either takes Toscanini's lack of charm in the third movement or one does not; it's part of the deal, but there is no denying that transparency he achieves. We hear in this restoration how carefully the wind chords are balanced, and we even hear a certain sheen to the violins. The Feierlich, though, is glorious musically from the woodwind and brass, the string pizzicatos startlingly close. This is the movement allegedly inspired by a service in Cologne Cathedral, and Toscanini finds all the nobility required. The finale has the bright energy of a fresh-air walk. The marking is Lebhaft (Lively), which Toscanini takes not to mean fast. Instead, he achieves the sense of momentum through exact ensemble and tight rhythm. That momentum is unstoppable, and as Schumann aggregates his layers of orchestration, remarkably the recording is able to hold its own. Paganini's Moto perpetuo is indeed a sonic statement of the virtuosity of the NBC violins, a fine testament of the discipline Toscanini instilled in his players.

The Mussorgsky *Pictures* is consistently involving. Again, that rock-solid discipline enables gestures to speak with maximum potency, The sound of the sax, in particular, comes across with remarkable presence. This is a performance of much character, at times almost unbuttoned—the polar opposite of the "Rhenish," in many ways. The "Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks" is delightful; only retrospectively does one remember the polish and the unanimity of ensemble, not to mention the detail available (and there's an audible murmur of amused appreciation from the audience at the end of that movement). It's lovely to hear body on the string octaves in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle"; those octaves become positively ominous later on. Toscanini's almost grotesque "Hut on Fowl's Legs" is all the more remarkable for Caniell's restoration. Timbral contrasts are superbly rendered, enabling Ravel's kaleidoscope of an orchestration to be truly thrilling in its multicolored mastery. In terms of the dynamic capabilities of the recording, it is the "Great Gate" that holds the real test, and the music emerges triumphant—glowing, even. Plus, there is a huge dynamic range, from the quietest woodwind chorale to the most shattering tutti fortissimo.

Born in Berlin, Paul Graener resided in London for a spell prior to the First World War before returning to Germany, He joined the Nazi party in 1933 as part of the Reichsmusikkammer. The present Suite was his most popular work. It is a restful piece, pleasant in extremis, consisting of an Introduction and Saraband, a Gavotte, an Air, and a final Rigodon. Certainly, the first movement has some grandeur about it, in a sort of post-Baroque way. There was a currency for this at the time of performance, and it is admittedly difficult to elude the charms of the Gavotte, probably the closest Toscanini ever got to tripping along lightly with a spring in his step. The final Rigodon starts out as

terrific fun, and again there is a sense of enjoyment from the players. The woodwinds pipe playfully as if without a care in the world. Sonically, the restoration has worked miracles. The top is certainly not harsh—dare I say it, even pleasant.

It really is remarkable to think that this is the world premiere of “the” Adagio for Strings, the string orchestra version of a movement from Barber’s op. 11 String Quartet here. Everything about Toscanini’s reading works (modern ears might need to adjust to the odd portamento, though): It is tender without indulgence. There is a purity to the beauty one hears, a freshness of discovery, with the NBC strings able to shade nuance to the nth degree. The performance, too, is superior to the RCA studio account, more involved, more concentrated (as would be natural of course, this being the world premiere). And on to more Barber, with his Essay for Orchestra (later First Essay, of course), again a world premiere performance, exquisite in its dusky hues. Toscanini’s lack of sentimentality benefits the music hugely; it remains impassioned without veering towards the sentimental. It’s nice to hear the pizzicato detail, and the woodwind contributions come through well. This is a gem of a performance, with the woodwind light and virtuoso just after the halfway mark, and strings scampering infectiously.

We are back on more familiar territory with Debussy’s *Ibéria*. The piece requires huge character from its players as well as x-ray hearing from the conductor. This is really quite a remarkable performance. Toscanini’s penchant for drive plays dividends in the first movement (“Par les rues et par les chemins”), while the NBC winds come through just beautifully in this transfer in the central “Les parfums de la nuit.” This is evocative without being overtly sensual in affect, thanks to Toscanini’s firm sense of underlying pulse; the final “Le matin d’un jour de fête” is full of thrilling energy. The near-silence of the background here is remarkable; as restoration work, this is exemplary.

When it comes to Dvořák, this particular performance of the “New World” has much to recommend it, and certainly has a buoyancy that is compelling. This closed the concert. There is more flexibility here, if not quite as much as Robert Matthew-Walker’s booklet notes suggest. The orchestral standard is once more on fire (not least the trumpet arpeggiation a few pages out from the end of the first movement). It’s fascinating to be able to hear the string bed to the famous English horn melody so clearly, and to hear how the various elements lead to a “lilt” in the Scherzo. There is real affection here. Yes, some of that overdrive is present in the finale, the bandmaster of repute; despite a unanimity of ensemble that any orchestra in any era would be proud of, this is the weakest movement.

There is a “bonus,” a complete performance of Schumann’s Second Symphony, from some seven years later. Toscanini excelled in this symphony, the least favored by audiences of Schumann’s four. Why, I will never know, and whenever I have attended a live performance it has always been well received. Toscanini’s 1945 reading is lean and sinewy. It is one of only two performances of the Schumann Second that Toscanini led in his 17 years with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, but what understanding we hear of Schumann’s processes. Caniell appears to have restored myriad overtones, as there is a lovely body to the sound, with virtually no harshness to the top and great clarity to the bass, with again little to no muddying in the mid-range. That quicksilver Scherzo could

have been written expressly for Toscanini and his ear for tight ensemble. The tenderness of the slow movement is remarkable: Chords appear lit from within; the tempo is perfect for the music to grow organically. The enthusiasm of the opening of the finale shines through some crowding in the recording, but what a performance this is. For all the documentary value of the main body of the set, this is an instance of the bonus trumping all else.

These transfers really are remarkable; it seems impossible these recordings date from the late 1930s.