

TOSCANINI

**Philadelphia Orchestra
Victor Recordings Restored, Volume 2**

Mendelssohn: Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

R. Strauss: *Death And Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung)*

Edwina Eustis (sop); Florence Kirk (sop); University of Pennsylvania Women's
Glee Club; Philadelphia Orchestra; 12 January 1942

And:

MOZART: Overture to *Die Zauberflöte*.

HAYDN: Symphony No. 99.

STRAUSS: *Ein heldenleben*.

NBC Symphony Orchestra, 1 February 1941

- IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1129-2 (2 CDs: 135:25)

Review by Ken Meltzer
Fanfare Magazine March / April 2020

Immortal Performances continues its valuable documentation of the legacy of Arturo Toscanini with this superb two-disc set, comprising 1942 RCA studio recordings with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a complete February 1, 1941 NBC Symphony Orchestra broadcast. In the Nov/Dec 2019 issue of *Fanfare* (43:2), I reviewed an IP set that included magnificent restorations of Toscanini's celebrated 1942 Philadelphia Orchestra recordings of the Tchaikovsky "Pathétique" Symphony, and Debussy's *La mer*. In my review, I reported the superiority of the IP restorations over those in RCA's "Arturo Toscanini: The Complete RCA Collection", and noted: "as a result of this significant aural improvement, the musical and dramatic impact of the interpretations / performances is greatly enhanced." Perhaps the improvement in the IP restorations of the Philadelphia versions of Mendelssohn's Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* is not quite as dramatic. Nevertheless, the IP restorations still outshine those by RCA, and by a noticeable margin. In both the Mendelssohn and Strauss, Richard Caniell and IP have succeeded in reproducing an acoustic that reveals more presence and definition in quieter episodes, in conjunction with greater breadth, concert hall ambience, and beauty in passages with more forceful dynamics. If you don't already own these performances (and you should!), the IP release is now your first choice. And even if these recordings are already a part of your collection, you owe it to yourself to hear what IP has achieved with the source material. The performances, well known, and justifiably celebrated, are always worth revisiting. As I wrote in my Nov/Dec 2019 review: "The Philadelphia-Toscanini RCA recordings are a coveted part of the Italian Maestro's discography, pairing a conductor at the height of his powers with one of the world's great orchestras. And indeed, it is a thrill to hear Toscanini's discipline, precision, and drive wedded to an orchestra with the glowing sonority of Stokowski's Philadelphians

(of course, Stokowski could be a stern taskmaster, and Toscanini could, as well as any conductor, inspire an orchestra to play radiantly).” In these recordings, we find Toscanini adopting a more expansive and flexible view than may be found in NBC SO performances of the same repertoire, and especially given the beauty of the playing of the Philadelphians, that is all to the better. The Mendelssohn *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music brims with a glowing sonority, juxtaposing a magical sense of lyrical repose with moments of irrepressible energy and humor. Toscanini was a great Strauss interpreter, and both the Philadelphia *Death and Transfiguration* and 1941 NBC SO *Ein heldenleben* are memorable renditions. Toscanini’s keen sense of drama generally carried over from his operatic performances to his interpretations of orchestral repertoire, both absolute and programmatic. In *Death and Transfiguration*, the juxtaposition the struggles of the protagonist’s final moments on earth, and radiant ascent to heaven, are conveyed with the utmost intensity and humanity. Toscanini’s pacing is spot-on, and the level of execution by the Philadelphia Orchestra is that of an ensemble at the height of its powers. Treasurable recordings, and again, reproduced here in their finest sound to date.

The February 1, 1941 Toscanini-NBC SO complete broadcast is yet another gift. As is IP’s custom, generous portions of the radio host’s (here, Gene Hamilton) commentary are included, transporting the listener back to another era. On this occasion, both Toscanini and the NBC are in top form. The concert program includes Mozart’s Overture to *Die Zauberflöte*, Haydn’s Symphony No. 99, and Strauss’s *Ein heldenleben*—it’s a veritable E-flat Major feast! I’ve commented in reviews of several IP releases of Toscanini recordings that quite often, the actual performances don’t comport with the stereotypes attached to this great conductor. And in this broadcast, we once again come face to face with a conductor who is hardly a slave to quick tempos and metronomic phrasing. The *Magic Flute* Overture, for example, opens with a glorious account of the slow-tempo introduction, broadly paced, with a rich sonority that, in this restoration, gives full due to the bass voices of the orchestra (the latter quality is evident throughout this broadcast, to gratifying effect). The ensuing *Allegro* is taken at a whirlwind pace, but never sounds rushed, and there is admirable flexibility in the phrasing. In the Haydn Symphony No. 99, Toscanini again explores the expressive potential of the moments in broader tempo. Both the first movement’s introduction and entire second movement are marked *Adagio*, and Toscanini most certainly adheres to Haydn’s directive. Elsewhere, quick-tempo portions are fleet, but as in the Mozart, never to excess. And it’s wonderful to hear Toscanini adopt a tender, flexible approach where warranted, as in the first movement *Vivace assai*’s tender second principal subject. I wish Toscanini had taken a few more of Haydn’s score repeats, but both the practice of day, and in all likelihood, constraints in allotted broadcast time, dictated otherwise. Still, it is a wonderful performance. The *Heldenleben* is absolutely breathtaking. The opening section, *The Hero*, embodies all the unstoppable momentum and vaulting pride Strauss intended, as Toscanini elicits a grand, warm, and singing tone from the orchestra, enhanced by razor-sharp execution. *The Hero’s Adversaries* (the composer’s critics) are here an especially petty and malevolent group, thanks to a quick pacing and acidic, pinpoint articulation. In *The Hero’s Companion*, Toscanini allows concertmaster Mischa Mischakoff ample

breadth and freedom to create an unforgettable portrait of Strauss's wife, Pauline. The ensuing battle sequence is breathtaking in terms of its momentum, execution, and overwhelming power. Toscanini adopts a noticeably broad pace in the concluding two sections, *The Hero's Works of Peace* and *The Hero's Retreat from the World*. As a result the music emerges with particular beauty, dignity and emotional impact. It would be difficult to overstate the drama and nobility that Toscanini and the NBC SO bring to this work. This is a *Heldenleben* that must be a part of any representative collection. And in IP's restoration, the entire broadcast may be heard in an acoustic that competes with commercial recordings of the era, and for that matter, is better than many such Toscanini-NBC SO RCA releases. Marvelous.

The booklet includes Robert Matthew-Walker's extensive, thought-provoking essay, as well as Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. In those notes, Caniell informs us: "we have experimented with the remaining Toscanini Philadelphia Orchestra recordings and have determined that we cannot achieve a significant enough improvement for *Iberia*, *Queen Mab Scherzo* and the Schubert Ninth Symphony, so there is no prospect of further work by us on these." As disappointed as I am to hear that news, I am grateful for the marvelous work Caniell and IP did on the Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Mendelssohn, and Strauss. Couple that with the magnificent February 1, 1941 NBC broadcast, and you have a release that earns the highest recommendation.

5 Stars: Superb restorations of 1942 Toscanini/Philadelphia recordings, and an electrifying 1941 NBC SO *Heldenleben*.

Review by Colin Clarke
Fanfare March/April 2020

It is instructive to compare Immortal Performances transfers of the Mendelssohn and the Richard Strauss *Tod und Verklärung* here with the RCA *Toscanini Collection* Volumes 70 and 68 respectively (Toscanini recorded these works on January 12, 1942). The Immortal Performances allow as much if not more detail from the fast strings in the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to come through as in the RCA, but the sound is more involving; at climaxes, Caniell's sound is far more pleasurable to experience, as the transfer handles the extremes far more comfortably. The horn "interruptions" just after the four-minute mark make just as much impact in the Immortal Performance transfer, but are more sonorous; the RCA is edgy and harsh in comparison.

The RCA Intermezzo suffers from metallic high violins on RCA; it is significantly more convincing via Immortal Performances, where one gets involved all the more easily in Toscanini's reading—which is full of dramatic tension (in the RCA that sounds more like on-edge, nervous tension). We also hear the woodwind more clearly. When it comes to the famous Nocturne, the RCA is actually a fair sound for the solo horn, but the slightly lighter sound via Immortal Performances enables us to hear more detail of what is going on

around that solo; the horn sounds more natural, too, and the balance of the high first violin “cover notes” to the melody is perfect in Caniell’s version (the strings sound sweeter, too).

The so-called “Elves Chorus,” better known perhaps as “Ye spotted snakes” is certainly more in-your-face- on the RCA: This is what Caniell means in his notes that one has to adjust levels between the two, something even clearer at the “Wedding March.” But there is also more detail on the Immortal Performances, plus the voices in “Ye spotted snakes” have more presence and depth, and so are more believable. We hear everything from the woodwinds (and horns) in the famous Scherzo in the Immortal Performances; we hear a great deal in the RCA, but the somewhat fuller, even boomier sound, occludes as well as actually leadens the sound (and, with it, our experience). That rather more deadened RCA sound informs the finale: “Hand in hand with fairy grace will we sing and bless this place” is the lyric here, not really a line aligned with base metals. In the Immortal Performances, the bass is tighter, the overall sound more evenly spread across the frequency range. Caniell is absolutely correct to correct the horn split on the RCA towards the end of the finale as well. The performance is a magnificent one, and now at last we can appreciate just how magnificent.

On to the Strauss *Tod und Verklärung*, then. Caniell has restored overtones missing in the RCA account, which enables a far more burnished, realistic sound picture to emerge. There seems to be more detail at the beginning in the Immortal Performances. When it comes to the *Allegro molto agitato*, that agitation comes far more to the fore in the Caniell transfer, the sound more open and therefore far more able to cope with the *fortissimos* in this passage. It works in the more delicate passages, too. The dream of dying passage (*Meno mosso*) is entirely convincing in the Immortal Performances transfer: The solo violin is nice and silvery, the wind characterful and perfectly Straussian. In the RCA transfer it is all at one remove, and the lower lines are blunted. The Immortal Performances climax to this final section preserves the power of Toscanini’s vision in a way the RCA fails to due to a more boxy sound. This Immortal Performances set allows us to appreciate Toscanini’s importance as a Strauss interpreter all the more; the way he traces the large-scale spans while honoring the minutiae is miraculous.

The concert here comes from February 1, 1941, with commentary by Gene Hamilton. It opens with a zippy *Zauberflöte* Overture before a Haydn Symphony No. 99 that is completely and utterly convincing. The seventh of the “London” Symphonies, it is a work of exquisite charm, but no little power too. Toscanini honors both poles, reveling in their juxtapositions in the first movement. It’s good that the present transfer has a tight bottom, so that one can hear the linear/harmonic workings to best effect. We might balk at the tempo for the *Adagio* today (it is a proper *Adagio*), but Toscanini ensures the violins are completely together in their lines and the interpretation is completely convincing. A robust third movement is not above the odd moment of string portamento and holds a gloriously light Trio. The finale is taken at quite a lick, but the NBC strings are ever its equal.

Finally, there comes more Strauss, the wonderful *Heldenleben*. There is a huge amount of detail available in this performance, thanks to the Immortal Performances restoration. Try the woodwind around the critics’ section; also notice how climaxes fail to crowd. Toscanini’s *Heldenleben* is one of the greats, and to hear it like this enables it to take its place in the pantheon. He gives the

music all the space it needs. The dynamism of the battle scene is undeniable; but so is the power of the softer, sweeter music. Distant trumpet fanfares make their mark perfectly, and the fact the recording can hold the extremities of Strauss's scoring in the battle is remarkable. The sense of repose at the hero's works of peace is glorious, and how Toscanini, and the recording, allow us to hear Strauss's linear workings here. The latter part of the work finds Toscanini at his finest, the tempos perfectly chosen to track the Hero's exit from the world. Perhaps it is the sheer force of that last-gasp outburst that is the most telling.

This is a superb and most varied set, and one that allows us to hear the Maestro's Mendelssohn and Strauss with new ears. One has to salute the surely huge amount of work that goes into releases such as this.