

TWO FAREWELL CONCERTS • Arturo Toscanini, cond; New York PO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1105-2 (2 CDs: 159:29) Live: Carnegie Hall, New York 4/29/1936, 1/13/1945

WAGNER Die Meistersinger: Act I Prelude. Siegfried Idyll. Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod. Die Walküre: Ride of the Valkyries. Live: Carnegie Hall, New York 4/29/1936

HAYDN Symphony No. 101. RESPIGHI The Pines of Rome. SIBELIUS The Swan of Tuonela. Götterdämmerung: Siegfried's Death and Funeral March. WEBER Euryanthe: Overture. Live: Carnegie Hall, 1/13/1945

Bonus: Tannhäuser: Overture and Bacchanale. Live: Carnegie Hall 2/3/1935

Review by Ken Meltzer

FANFARE November / December 2018

Among the American orchestras Arturo Toscanini conducted, his association with the NBC Symphony Orchestra is the best known and most extensively documented by recordings. But prior to his first NBC SO concert in 1937, Toscanini led the New York Philharmonic (Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York) for a decade. On January 14, 1926, Toscanini conducted his first NY Philharmonic concert, leading works by Haydn, Respighi, Sibelius, Wagner, and Weber. Early in his tenure with the NY Philharmonic, Toscanini shared music director duties with Willem Mengelberg. In 1930, Toscanini became the sole music director, and under his leadership the New York Philharmonic was celebrated as one of the world's finest ensembles. On April 29, 1936, Toscanini conducted his final concert as the orchestra's music director. The broadcast portion of the concert comprised works by Richard Wagner. Even after Toscanini began his affiliation with the NBC SO, Toscanini returned on occasion to lead the NY Philharmonic. On January 13, 1945, Toscanini and the NY Philharmonic performed a Carnegie Hall concert, held as a benefit for the Musicians' Pension Fund. On that occasion, Toscanini chose precisely the same program as his January 14, 1926 debut. It proved to be Toscanini's final concert with the NY Philharmonic. And so, both the April 29, 1936 and January 13, 1945 concerts are farewells of sorts. The concerts are paired on a new Immortal Performances set. I've had the occasion when reviewing

other Toscanini-NY Philharmonic Immortal Performances sets (of both commercial and in-performance recordings), to write about the unique importance of these documents. When Toscanini first led the NY Philharmonic, he was 58 and at the height of his powers. It's not surprising that Toscanini's work with the NY Philharmonic reveals an incredible precision of ensemble, a glorious singing tone, and an unerring sense of the work's architecture and overall momentum. These are all qualities familiar from Toscanini's NBC SO legacy. But the NY Philharmonic recordings also document an interpreter far more willing to explore broader tempos, a beguiling application of rubato, and, on occasion, the tantalizing use of string glissandos. In addition, the NY Philharmonic was an ensemble of greater beauty and tonal richness throughout the registers than Toscanini's excellent NBC SO. You might argue (and I do) that the NY Philharmonic years represent Toscanini's finest as a conductor—at least, among the years preserved on recordings. Every Toscanini-NY Philharmonic recording is a treasure to be explored and savored. These “farewell” concerts are no exception.

Immortal Performances' source for the April 29, 1936 Wagner concert is a set of 16-inch lacquer discs, recorded privately and off the air. In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell details the care, labor, and technology required to overcome the flaws in the lacquer discs, as well as flaws created by the original broadcast engineers, whose microphone placement compromised both dynamic range and ensemble detail. The restored 1936 concert does not approximate the sonic quality of contemporaneous studio recordings (Toscanini's commercial recordings with the NY Philharmonic for Victor are among the glories of that era). But the sound on the Immortal Performances release provides ample dynamic range, detail, and color, allowing anyone experienced with historic recordings to enjoy these magnificent performances. The opening Prelude to act I of *Die Meistersinger* is superb in every way. Toscanini adopts a broad tempo that showcases the NY Philharmonic's glorious rich and ideally blended sound. During the course of this Prelude, indeed the entire concert, there is not a measure that sounds either too slow or too hurried. Toscanini's pacing is unerring, and he and the orchestra revel in the Wagner's many delightful comic moments. The glorious final measures glow with all the majesty one could hope for. Two months before this concert, Toscanini and the NY Philharmonic made a commercial recording of the *Siegfried Idyll*. It remains one of the finest renditions on disc. The sound of the April 1936 concert, as

captured by the off-the-air discs, cannot begin to compete sonically with the commercial recording. Nevertheless, Caniell's restoration allows us to enjoy a performance that is remarkable for its sustained hushed lyrical beauty and forward pulse. Thanks to the Immortal Performances restoration, one gets a sense of how overwhelming this rendition must have been for the Carnegie Hall audience. The performance of the *Tristan* Prelude and *Liebestod* conveys, in breathtaking fashion, Wagner's ongoing harmonic tension and release, culminating in Isolde's final ecstatic outburst. It is one of the most intense, and in the end, most beautiful renditions I've heard of this pathbreaking, iconic music. A blazing, razor-sharp performance of the Ride of the Valkyries concludes the program. The broadcast includes Davidson Taylor's spoken commentary. Relegated to a separate track is his description of an incident in which a flash bulb temporarily blinded Toscanini, rendering the conductor unable to return to the stage for further bows. The disc concludes with a February 3, 1935 broadcast performance of the Overture and Bacchanale (Venusberg Music) from *Tannhäuser* (the Toscanini Estate provided the source recording for this music). The performance is again first-rate, beautifully paced and thrillingly executed. I have to confess that as much as I love Wagner, the Venusberg Music always overstays my welcome. Still, Toscanini and the orchestra give the music its full due.

The January 13, 1945 Pension Benefit Concert was not broadcast. However, at the request of Toscanini's son, Walter, Carnegie Hall recorded the program on 16-inch lacquer discs. Immortal Performances' restoration derives from a tape recording of those lacquer discs. My previous experience with this concert has been via a 2010 release on the Guild Historical label, billed as being derived "from second generation transcriptions." The Guild release is good enough to offer a fair representation of the concert. But it suffers from compressed dynamics and a lack of high-end response. The Immortal Performances set represents a significant improvement, with far greater dynamic range, instrumental color, and sense of concert stage depth. If the Immortal Performances restoration is not the equal of commercial recordings of the time it is close to that quality, and more than adequate to convey the electric atmosphere of the occasion. The performances are once again of the highest order. The Haydn "Clock" Symphony is a wonderful synthesis of lyricism, energy, and humor, all executed to perfection. When Toscanini led the Philharmonic in the January 14, 1926 performance of Respighi's *The Pines of*

*Rome*, it was the New York premiere of the work. For the remainder of his career, Toscanini remained a foremost advocate of the piece. In the Pension Fund Concert, the NY Philharmonic (a small horn bobble apart in the opening portion) plays its heart out for Toscanini and Respighi. A rapt *Swan of Tuonela* precedes a glorious account of Siegfried's Death and Funeral March. Weber's Overture to *Euryanthe*, a wonderful Romantic orchestral showpiece, is a blazing and appropriate conclusion to this concert, and to Toscanini's long and treasured association with the Philharmonic. The accompanying booklet includes essays by Robert Matthew-Walker, John Sullivan, and Richard Caniell. The Toscanini-New York Philharmonic legacy is one of the great artistic collaborations of the 20th century. Thanks to Immortal Performances for providing such important documents of that legacy, and in recorded sound that does them justice. A wonderful set, and very highly recommended.