

VERDI *Te Deum. Requiem* • Arturo Toscanini, cond; Renata Tebaldi (sop); Cloe Elmo (mez); Giacinto Prandelli (ten); Cesare Siepi (bs); Ch & O of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1106-2 AAD (2 CDs: 108:05) Live: Milan 6/24/1950

& Interview with Tebaldi (in Italian). ROSSINI *Mosè in Egitto: Dal tuo stellato soglio* (Arturo Toscanini, cond; Renata Tebaldi (sop); Jolando Gardino (mez); Giovanni Malipiero (ten); Tancredi Pasero (bs); Ch & O of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Live: Milan 5/11/1946)

Review by Ken Meltzer

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A new restoration of the Toscanini 1950 La Scala Verdi Requiem is now available, courtesy of Immortal Performances. I'm going to delve into some history and detail in this review, so allow me to begin by offering my opinion that the new issue offers this performance in by far the finest sound I've heard to date. Toscanini spent a good portion of his life championing the works of Verdi, whom the conductor met and conferred with on matters of interpretation. And it is clear from the six available recorded Toscanini performances of the Verdi Requiem that the Italian conductor put his heart and soul into the work. Toscanini conducted his first performance of the *Messa da Requiem* on January 27, 1902, at the La Scala Opera House in Milan. The performance was in commemoration of the first anniversary of Verdi's passing. In his 1978 Toscanini biography, Harvey Sachs notes further Toscanini/La Scala performances of the Verdi Requiem in 1913 (the centenary of Verdi's birth) and 1923. On June 24, 1950, Toscanini, 83 years old, led his final La Scala Requiem in a broadcast performance that also included the *Te deum* from the *Quattro pezzi sacri*. In a letter to a friend, Toscanini confided (without further elaboration) that the performance "left a bad taste in my mouth." I'm not sure if Toscanini ever heard air checks of the performance, at least as they have been shared with the public to date. If he had, the bad taste would only have worsened 10-fold. Previous issues of the 1950 La Scala Requiem have suffered from frequent wayward variation in pitch, harsh, cramped sonics, and shattering in louder passages (of which there are many in this epic work). This is a shame because, while I don't think the La Scala performance ranks among the absolute finest of the Toscanini renditions available on disc, it remains an important document of considerable musical, historic, and historical value.

Prior to the first performance in Milan on May 22, 1874, the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow dismissed the Requiem as Verdi's "latest opera in ecclesiastical garb." There is no doubt that in composing the Requiem, Verdi drew upon his 35 years of experience in the theater. Verdi was 60 at the time of the work's premiere, and had composed all but two of his 28 operas. And in truth, it would be hard to imagine a text more dramatic in subject than one depicting man at the end of his days upon Earth, awaiting eternal judgment. Toscanini embraced the dramatic, even theatrical quality of the Verdi Requiem. And in doing so, the conductor revealed that the aspects Bülow disdained are, in fact, a source of the Verdi Requiem's unique emotional impact and greatness. Toscanini demanded that the vocal soloists and chorus declaim the sacred text with the same kind of specificity and emotional involvement we expect from Aida, Violetta, Alvaro, or the Hebrews standing on the banks of the Euphrates, yearning to return to their homeland. Likewise, the orchestral portion of the score is, under Toscanini, delivered with the utmost point and impact. I think the most operatic (and therefore, most successful) of the Toscanini-led Requiem performances are the two from 1938 and one from 1940. In those performances, Toscanini, aided by superb vocal solo and choral forces, frequently adopts surprisingly broad and flexible tempos that time and again culminate in climaxes of overwhelming impact. The most famous of the Toscanini performances, issued commercially by RCA, is derived from a January 27, 1951 Carnegie Hall broadcast concert plus rehearsal material. Here, the approach is noticeably fleeter and more streamlined. To be sure, that performance has considerable merits, including the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Robert Shaw Chorale, and a strong quartet of vocal soloists (Herva Nelli, Fedora Barbieri, Giuseppe di Stefano, and Cesare Siepi). The recorded sound is quite good as well. Still, I find the 1938 and 1940 performances more persuasive. The 1950 La Scala performance strikes me as somewhat broader and more flexible than the 1951 Carnegie Hall broadcast, although the outlines are fairly similar. The quartet of soloists is wonderful; Renata Tebaldi in her radiant, youthful prime; Cloe Elmo, a superb Italian mezzo who was also the Quickly in Toscanini's legendary 1950 *Falstaff* broadcasts; the fine Italian tenor Giacinto Prandelli; and Siepi. They all sing magnificently and with the utmost expression and fervency. The execution by the La Scala Opera Orchestra and Chorus does not match the precision of the 1951 Carnegie Hall Requiem (but again, the latter was pieced together from both the performance and rehearsals to create a more pristine document). Still, there is no mistaking the commitment of all concerned, and the end result is a performance of great power and beauty. The same holds true for the powerful rendition of the *Te deum* that opens the La Scala concert.

As I mentioned, previous issues of the 1950 La Scala Requiem have been in regrettably poor sound. But once again, Richard Caniell has achieved a near miracle in restoring this performance. In his Recording Notes, Caniell states: "Essentially, I corrected the pitch variances, removed a pervasive transmission hum hearable in exposed passages, diminuated the bass end which had been grievously emphasized, thickening the textures. My changes are an endeavor to arrive at as much float or transparency as could be managed. The *crescendi* have been restored to a substantive shape in keeping with the dynamics between *piano* and *forte*. I've endeavored to reduce the coarseness and glare of the recording." The sound, while not the equal of commercial recordings of the same era, is now certainly competitive with contemporaneous broadcasts. As a result of Richard Caniell's efforts, the La Scala Requiem may not only be studied, but at long last enjoyed as a compelling representation of the work. The booklet includes essays by Robert Matthew-Walker, John Sullivan, and Richard Caniell, as well as artist photos and bios. A brief amount of broadcast commentary (in Italian) is included. As an appendix, there is an interview with Tebaldi (in Italian, with an English translation in the booklet by Luciano Crivello), and an excerpt from the 1946 reopening of La Scala conducted by Toscanini in which Tebaldi takes part in the prayer from Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*. I do firmly believe that the 1938 and 1940 performances represent Toscanini's best work in the Verdi Requiem. The Immortal Performances restorations of each provide the best available sound (Carnegie Hall, March 4, 1938, IPCD 1009-2; Queen's Hall, London, May 27, 1938, IPCD 1058-2; Carnegie Hall, November 23, 1940, IPCD 1073-2). There is also an April 26, 1948 Carnegie Hall performance that has been issued on Music & Arts (CD-1219). The sound is good, and the overall execution is quite fine, but the vocal quartet as a whole is the weakest among the available Toscanini versions. The 1951 RCA recording is a mainstay of the catalog, and will remain so. But if you are at all interested in the 1950 La Scala broadcast (and there are many compelling reasons for that), the Immortal Performances restoration is the clear first choice.

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Review by Colin Clarke

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The sound of the voice of an Italian announcer for this broadcast from Milan of Verdi's *Te Deum* seems to set the scene perfectly. To enhance the experience is the fact that Toscanini gave the Italian premiere of the *Te*

Deum in May 1898 (it was composed 1895–96). The chorus is in fabulous form, and the recording and transfer cope exceptionally well with the demands of the final *Fiat misericordia tua Domine*. The applause, though, is instantaneous after the quiet close of that movement, breaking the superb atmosphere created by Toscanini.

In *Fanfare* 40:1 I reported on the Immortal Performances pressing of Toscanini's May 1938 London performance of Verdi's Requiem (BBC, with Milanov, Thorborg, Roswaenge, and Moscona), a powerful performance. Arguments could rage to and fro about a dream team of soloists: Tebaldi and Roswaenge together, perhaps?

The source of the present release is a privately recorded Italian Radio rebroadcast. This performance from 1950 begins with a magnificently limpid *Requiem aeternam* in which chorus and strings seem to be on equal footing, an ear-opening dialogue interrupted by a heroic Prandelli, a firm Siepi, a golden Tebaldi, and a full-voiced Elmo. Toscanini allows the music to breathe, the silent rests receiving full due.

The test of any recording is the *Dies irae* of course, and this passes muster well. Not only do we get the sharp, incisive opening chords (and subsequently the bass drum retorts), but the chorus does not distort; neither does it in the brass-supported horrors of the *Rex tremendae*, while the choral cries of *Salva me* carry real weight thanks to the extra clarity available, their later interiorization equally aided and abetted by that clarity. We even get something of an effect of space with the trumpet calls; if not everything is audible from the chorus, surely we can understand the limitations here. The quieter moments are of remarkable concentration, not least contralto Chloë Elmo's resonant *Liber scriptum*, her pitching superb, her delivery absolutely of the moment. Only at the climax, when the vocal line rises to the higher parts of her range, is some strain evident. It's great to hear the clarity of the string pizzicato in this passage, too, so beautifully conveyed in this restoration. Elmo once again sings poignantly in the *Lux aeterna*.

Tebaldi and Elmo work beautifully together in the *Recordare*; it is a joy to hear the recording unstretched by Tebaldi's rising to her upper strata just as much as it is to experience Elmo's rich responses, while their octaves in the *Agnus Dei* provide one of the finest examples of two singers as one in this passage. Tebaldi is however not at her finest (there are some intonation issues occasionally, and she does not sound completely inside the lines at the closing *Requiem aeternam*) and yet there remains plenty to enjoy.

Giacinto Prandelli is a multifaceted tenor soloist, finding and possibly even actively seeking tenderness wherever possible (a notable *Hostias* from this aspect) but capable of the strength demanded of him. Cesare Siepi's rich bass oozes authority; he has full authority, matched by his accuracy of attack. There is no suggestion of scooping up to notes; they are hit straight in the middle. The *Dies irae* works if the solo quartet comprises four equals, as it does indeed here. Under Toscanini in this performance, the orchestra excels throughout. Listen to the pointing of accents in the orchestra's contribution to the Sanctus, for example.

The extras include an interview in Italian with Renata Tebaldi from an episode of a radio program called *An Angel on the Radio* (the "angel" bit being a famous Toscanini reference to Tebaldi on his return to La Scala). There are interesting insights (it is "better not to make a mistake" or else "the skies open," a reference to the Maestro's infamous temper). From the reopening concert of La Scala (May 11, 1946) we hear, therefore, Tebaldi's contribution to the Prayer from Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* which had previously appeared on a 1999 Naxos disc. It is truly beautiful, and heard here in wonderful sound for the period.