

T O S C A N I N I
VICTOR RECORDS RESTORED
THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA

TCHAIKOVSKY: SYMPHONY NO. 6, OP. 74 (PATHÉTIQUE)

DEBUSSY: LA MER
Recorded 8 and 9 February 1942

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THE NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Rossini: Overture to *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, rec. 28 June 1945
Rossini: Overture to *La Cenerentola*, rec. 8 June 1945, Carnegie Hall

HAYDN: SYMPHONY NO. 98 IN B FLAT MAJOR
Recorded in Carnegie Hall, 25 May 1945

BEETHOVEN CONCERTO NO. 1 FOR PIANO
AND ORCHESTRA IN C MAJOR, OP. 15
Ania Dorfmann, pf
Recorded in Carnegie Hall – 9 August 1945

Bonus

WAGNER: MEISTERSINGER, ACT I PRELUDE
Recorded in Carnegie Hall, 11 March 1946

Review by Ken Meltzer
FANFARE November / December 2019

A new 2-disc set from Immortal Performances features restorations of recordings Arturo Toscanini made for RCA in the early-mid 1940s. In the first part of that decade, Toscanini and his NBC SO underwent a brief separation. During that time, Toscanini conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra at its home venue, the Academy of Music, both in concert and recordings. The new IP set includes two of the Toscanini-Philadelphia recordings; the Tchaikovsky Sixth Symphony, and Debussy's *La mer*. The remainder of the recordings on this set, music by Rossini, Haydn, Beethoven, and Wagner, date from 1945-6, and are with the NBC SO. All of these recordings were previously issued by RCA, and are included in the 72-volume (plus DVD) "Arturo Toscanini: The Complete RCA Collection". IP and producer Richard Caniell have thrown down the

gauntlet, inviting comparisons of their new restorations with the RCA comprehensive set. Indeed, the liner notes accompanying the IP set reference the RCA disc and track numbers for easy reference. In each case, the comparison inures to the benefit of IP. All of the restored recordings are heard in sound that represents a noticeable improvement over the RCA. And in the case of the greater part of the NBC SO selections included on the second disc of the IP set, that sound is so improved, it showcases the featured works in a far better and more compelling artistic light.

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). The Tchaikovsky "Pathétique" is a justly famous recording. The performance is on the fleet side, no surprise to people familiar with Toscanini's reputation. But it is never hurried, and contains admirable flexibility of phrasing and at times, lovely string portamentos, most notably in the second movement's 5/4 "waltz". The performance is overflowing with lyricism, aching pathos, and where appropriate, dramatic fire, elements all enhanced by the glorious, blended sound of the Philadelphia Orchestra. It is true that the third-movement march hurtles at a whirlwind clip, but the hairpin precision creates a hair-raising cumulative impact, an ideal foil for the concluding *Adagio lamentoso* that follows. Here, Toscanini and the Orchestra wring every last bit of lyricism and heartfelt emotion out of Tchaikovsky's musical farewell (perhaps, also, the Russian composer's farewell to life, too). Toscanini also brilliantly ties together the themes of the finale with their predecessors in the first and second movements. *La mer* is another landmark performance, with the performers reveling in Debussy's impressionist masterwork. It's a recording that documents an ideal synthesis of the celebration of Debussy's rich, luminous, and transparent orchestral palette, with a breathtaking precision and clarity of execution. Perhaps it's worth noting that at the times of the world premieres of the "Pathétique" and *La mer*, Toscanini was, respectively, 26, and 38. In these recordings, neither work sounds like a venerable warhorse. Rather, both breathe with the life and excitement of music being experienced and enjoyed for the very first

time, albeit at the highest level of execution imaginable. The sound in the complete RCA Toscanini set of these two magnificent recordings was certainly more than adequate to appreciate and enjoy their greatness. But Richard Caniell's restorations for IP are a dramatic improvement. RCA employed a fair amount of filtering, resulting in a somewhat compressed acoustic. Caniell has eliminated much of that filtering. It is true that the surface grit of the source recordings is now more evident. But it is not distracting or intrusive, and the payoff is a sonic canvas of strikingly enhanced depth, instrumental detail, and beauty. In the IP restoration of these recordings, the beauty of the Philadelphia Orchestra's strings, winds, and brass shines through as never before. And as a result of this significant aural improvement, the musical and dramatic impact of the interpretations/performances is greatly enhanced.

The NBC SO discs on this set (save the 1946 *Meistersinger* Act I Prelude) have not received the universal critical adulation accorded the Philadelphia discs. All of the recordings, were made at New York's Carnegie Hall (save the Haydn Symphony No. 98, made in Studio 8H). But on these occasions (again, except for the *Meistersinger* Prelude), the fabled acoustics of the old Carnegie Hall are not in evidence. The sound is compressed, harsh, and lacking in detail. Here Toscanini does, with a few exceptions, favor quick tempos, and the cumulative results are performances that sound rushed, and lacking in beauty and charm. But in his restorations, Richard Caniell has achieved a miraculous improvement. The recorded sound now has a welcome sense of depth and space, sweetness of tone, and striking clarity and definition of instrumental voices. The Rossini Overtures (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Cenerentola*) are no longer brutish and overbearing. Now, they skip along with a lightness of touch and singing quality hardly suggested in previous editions. Likewise, the Haydn No. 98 emerges as a joyous, buoyant performance, enhanced by the broadly-paced slow-tempo second movement in which the strings distinguish themselves with a beautiful singing tone, and lovely portamentos. These qualities are not nearly so evident in earlier issues. I have to confess that the Beethoven First Piano Concerto still sounds rushed to me (a lovely second movement apart), but pianist Ania Dorfmann is up to the task, and the sound here is far more attractive than before. The 1946 *Meistersinger* excerpt was in good sound to begin with. But it, too, benefits from Caniell's lovely restoration that reveals even more of the beauties of an interpretation by one of Wagner's great interpreters.

The booklet includes a lovely essay by Robert Matthew-Walker, Richard Caniell's recording notes, and artist and annotator bios. There are several other Toscanini-Philadelphia recordings (Debussy's *Ibéria*, Respighi's *Feste romane*, Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung*, and Schubert's 9th Symphony). Perhaps the current release will be successful enough to encourage Richard Caniell and IP to provide restorations of those treasures as well. In the meantime, treat yourself to this superb release, and hear these grand performances as never before. Highest recommendation.

Ken Meltzer

5 Stars: Classic Toscanini Recordings in Their Finest Sound Ever.