

A SINGER'S VIEW OF TOSCANINI

By NAN MERRIMAN

TO CAST my mind back nearly twenty-five years and recall exact conversations isn't one of my specialties. I can't do it. But what I can do is remember vividly my feelings. After all, meeting Arturo Toscanini was the greatest single event in my life; I'm hardly likely to forget any of it.

I was twenty-three years old when, in 1943, he heard me singing with his NBC Symphony. It was a fifteen-minute broadcast—the first I had ever made—and it was part of my reward for winning the first prize in the NFMC (National Federation of Music Clubs) biannual contest for young musicians. Until then, they must count as the most important fifteen minutes I ever spent. Maestro liked what he heard and sent word to the studio that he desired a private audition. A few days later, he and his son, Walter, came down from Riverdale to the NBC studios, where I was waiting for him. With some forethought I had inquired of a studio official what sort of aria I should sing, and upon being informed that in two months Maestro was planning an all-Verdi program for a special Treasury Department broadcast, I decided upon the great Eboli aria from *Don Carlos* ("O don fatale!"). Artur Balsam, who was then a member of the NBC Symphony, had kindly consented to accompany me. My musical sophistication at the time was such that I had learned this aria as printed in a book of Collected Arias for Mezzo-Soprano—the editor of which had kindly transposed down the entire scene one-and-a-half tones.

The great moment arrived. I was nearly overcome with joy—and no little reassured to observe that my idol was wearing a bright red cravat in honor of the May sunshine pouring down outside. Balsam began the piano introduction and I got out the first phrase when Maestro jumped up from his seat, rushed to the piano, crying "*Non è giusto!*"—pushed Balsam from the bench, and began the accompaniment in its original key, motioning me to begin. I literally sang for my (artistic) life. Somehow I summoned nerve enough to sing that aria through. Maestro liked it and believed in me enough to engage me then and there for his Verdi program. But the point is that *he* carried *me* through that audition. He had that sort of magic.

Maestro was a great believer in piano

rehearsals with his artists. For weeks before the first orchestra rehearsal, Maestro would prepare his soloists privately. In the spring of 1950—just before beginning a six-week coast-to-coast tour with his NBC Symphony—we began preparations for the broadcast performance of Verdi's *Falstaff*. My notebooks indicate that our piano rehearsals averaged six hours a day for six weeks. That was for all ten singers and, of course, Maestro. NBC, thinking to spare him the arduous work of accompanying these marathon rehearsals, had engaged a fine Italian conductor for the task, but my recollection is that the gentleman spent more time off the piano bench than on it—Maestro was at the keyboard, a very happy man. In a way, I suppose, it was easier for him to play than to listen. When *he* played he obtained precisely his shading of tempo, precisely the *forte* or *piano* he wanted—one less cue to give. He was a marvelous pianist, I thought. Not a great flashing technique or bravura-style power-player—but he made me hear the orchestral part when he played the accompaniments. His powers of evocation were enormous.

All this was a rather stunning contrast to the methods of another conductor with whom I later sang the same opera. Finding piano rehearsals rather dull, he held none at all—until he tried the finale. That Fugue, with its ten solo entrances, chorus, and orchestra, apparently changed his mind. He had one piano rehearsal.



—U.S. Government.

Maestro at the keyboard
—"a very happy man."

I suppose Toscanini's happiest rehearsal times were the first orchestra readings of the various operas and concert works he performed, utilizing chorus and soloists. Piano rehearsals were necessary evils and—at times—marvelous. But when he had his first run-through with the orchestra of *Otello*, *Falstaff*, Beethoven's Ninth, or *Missa*—then he was truly in his element. He got to sing *all* the parts, give *all* the cues; then *all* the phrasings were *just* right. When it was an Italian work the enunciation was flawless—all the double consonants were glitteringly produced—the *piano* phrases were really soft, the *fortissimi* truly thundered.

ONE thing which infuriated him was the lack of attention many singers gave to the written notation of their scores. If Verdi took the time and trouble to write in the admonition *ff . . . tutta forza*, surely we *ignoranti* could read? When the sign *pp* appeared, why did the stupid singer persist in a pedestrian *nif*? Imprecations rent the air. One piece of splendid advice he gave singers frequently: When your part is written *pi-anissimo*—sing as softly as possible but pronounce *forte*—articulate with the greatest care (a piece of advice I took to heart and which later proved of immeasurable help in performances of French song literature).

Toscanini held unique rehearsals. No time was wasted on socializing or "getting together." When a work called for several soloists, we began working as soon as everyone was in the room. Until then, as the group gathered—and the tension!—we all more or less tried to be invisible. We were there to work. It was wonderfully amusing to me, a debutante, to observe world-famous operatic personalities trying *not* to attract attention. One of my colleagues, not particularly known as the shy-violet type, seemed actually to shrink in size as he sat there—no mean feat considering his space displacement. He was experiencing the My-God-What-If-He-Asks-Me-Something-I-Don't-Know Syndrome. We all felt it.

Over an eleven-year period, I must have attended hundreds of rehearsals with Maestro. While our musical association developed into the happiest of friendships once the rehearsals were over, during working hours there was no quarter given. This was his invariable

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TOSCANINI AND THE RECORDING MACHINE

By ROBERT C. MARSH

THE PARADOX of recording, as seen by Arthur Schnabel, was that the machine was not good enough but in some respects it was too good. It was quite equal to preserving niggling errors of technique and obvious false notes which no artist willingly bestows upon an anonymous posterity. It was unequal to presenting the full range of color and sonority, the dynamic scale, spaciousness, clarity, and impact that distinguish a live musical statement. A performance for the machine had to be calculated with regard for the limitations of the means by which the machine heard music and remembered it, and the machine could be a great leveler.

Few conductors who made orchestral recordings by the acoustical method found much pleasure either in the process or the result. Leopold Stokowski rebelled and began what has proved to be a lifelong interest in the reproduction of sound. Arturo Toscanini was a more elemental musical force. His mechanical aptitude was practically nil. His knowledge of mathematics and science was slight. He did not understand how records were made and did not wish to learn. He wanted to hear something he could accept as a likeness of himself at work, and he responded to these proffered likenesses with a complete interaction of ear, heart, and mind. The outcome was not coldly rational. One can question whether he ever acquired an objective approach to the analysis and appraisal of his recorded performances, whether they were the acoustical product of 1920 or the professed high-fidelity disc of thirty-five years later. Some horribly flawed records appeared with Toscanini's approval, and some of his most interesting work was held back—often because of minor failings.

For a number of years Toscanini accepted—although not without protest—a level of engineering considerably below the best provided Koussevitzky, Stokowski, and others in the same period. What Toscanini was unable to grasp was that some of the failings were of his own making, due in part to his willingness to record in a broadcasting studio instead of a distinguished concert room, and the captious quality of his relationship to recording engineers and their product. A final irony is that Toscanini stopped making records precisely at a

point that ensured rapid obsolescence for his efforts. Although taped experimentally in stereo, the greater part of his output consists of monophonic, medium-fi material. This a mass audience was inclined to set aside for less interesting work by other conductors who were able to profit from superior recording technique. Had Toscanini led even one stereo recording session in 1955, his whole recorded legacy might be changed by the availability of a few stunning likenesses of his work that could compete in a multi-channel medium.

As things are, the enjoyment of Toscanini recordings makes demands upon the imagination and, for those who possess it, upon the memory of the distinctive sound of his orchestra in live performances. With a background of this type, there is not a Toscanini disc that does not contain things of interest (although some of the extensively doctored editions are to be avoided). Without such prerequisites, one may simply hear another old record—and the magic may prove elusive.

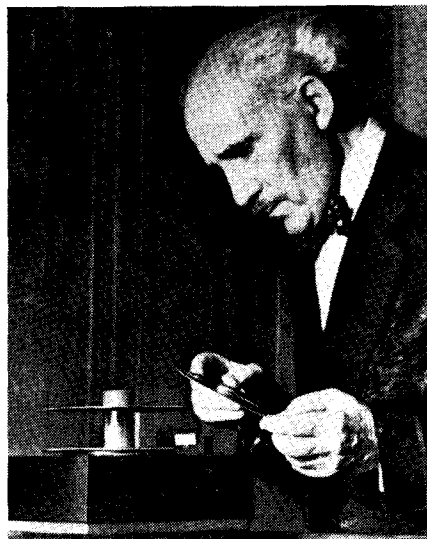
FOR half his career Toscanini avoided making any records at all. Even during his eleven seasons with the New York Philharmonic, when he was at the peak of his influence and artistic power, he made only two batches of records (in the late 1920s and in 1936). He then declared he could not grasp how anyone could derive genuine musical satisfac-

tion from listening to them, a remark that requires the understanding that Toscanini did not hear them played as well as we can today. He seems to have been more tolerant of his series from 1935-39 with the BBC Symphony, discs that contain some of the best likenesses of his work from before World War II.

When his association with the NBC Symphony began in 1937 it was hoped there would be a steady flow of Toscanini records to complement the national impact of the Toscanini broadcasts; and, indeed, his output increased, although many of his most successful efforts were not the product of the recording session but were made under the more relaxed conditions of a broadcast concert. When mastering changed from disc to tape, many problems were eased, and eventually there were high-fidelity productions which the Old Man said he really liked; but it was a long and difficult road, and the stay at the summit was too short.

Toscanini made his first records in 1920. The orchestra was that of La Scala, but the event took place in a Camden, New Jersey, church the Victor company used as a studio for large performing groups. These sessions of its American tour, which produced sixteen single-faced records in ten working days, were pure unmitigated misery for Toscanini, although by the standards of the times he achieved above average results. He would have nothing further to do with the recording horn. With the arrival of the microphone and the electrical cutting head, he was persuaded to try again during his first Philharmonic season, and he recorded in 1926 and 1929. Again he was dissatisfied, although the results were good in terms of the available technology.

Victor tried various methods to please him. Toscanini's whole artistic approach was directed toward a performance with a long line that provided unbroken continuity of development, an effect that was difficult to achieve if the music had to be divided into four-minute takes and was even more elusive if a segment that was satisfactory in nearly all respects had to be recut to correct minor errors. An experiment with optical recording on photographic film promised extended time, plus some ability to splice and make corrections, but the results were not of satisfactory quality and were never released. At Salzburg in 1937, engineers preserved complete Toscanini opera performances on the Selenophone,



—RCA Victor Records.

Toscanini with a 45 rpm disc—
“What he does not know and understand, he fears and hates. . . .”