

## Toscanini, Then and Now

It would be terrible if our souls always showed their naked selves! No one would have anything to do with his fellow man, and perhaps not even with himself!

—Letter from Arturo Toscanini  
to Ada Mainardi, July 10, 1938

IT IS HARD FOR ME TO BELIEVE THAT FIFTY YEARS HAVE PASSED since those extraordinary evenings when my parents and I huddled around our first TV set to witness a concert performance by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. The TV was a ten-inch RCA with a round picture tube made to look rectangular by cabinetry. The sound was tinny and the picture was black and white. Yet what I witnessed as a music-crazed college student was little less than a sacred event, especially if it was Beethoven's Ninth, one of the "Maestro's" kinetic, titanic specialties. With his taut bearing, sprawling moustache, and white hair, Toscanini was a commanding figure who, even without histrionics, could whip his musicians into demonic overdrive that left his audiences gasping for breath. Then too, during those early fifties, Toscanini's last years of conducting, when he hovered in his eighties, he recorded an amazing series of new performances onto LPs to take advantage of the hi-fi and phonographic revolutions in audio that were very quickly to render obsolete the 78 rpm disks on which all of his previous recorded work was engraved. But what has taken place since then, in both the world of classical music and the world of audio, could hardly be imagined back in 1950, a subject to which I will return below.

Watching this imposing and monumental figure in the innocence of youth and behind the gentilities of the early 1950s provided no clue to the complex person revealed in Harvey Sachs's artfully collected and edited volume of Toscanini's letters.<sup>1</sup> This book, unmistakably from Knopf, even as Knopf has been swallowed up by a gigantic conglomerate, is admirable in every way. A handsome physical artifact elegantly printed on heavy laid paper, bound with the familiar Knopf deckled edges and consummately edited and translated from the mostly Italian materials by Sachs, this is a major contribution to musical and general culture (even though my copy has already fallen apart from flimsy attachment of cover to text). Sachs's 1978 biography of Toscanini has

<sup>1</sup> THE LETTERS OF ARTURO TOSCANINI, compiled, edited and translated by *Harvey Sachs*. Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.00.

been upstaged by the large cache of letters that subsequently tumbled out of auctions and catalogues in the 1990s to transform the existing portraits by removing some of the filters limiting their complexity.

Toscanini, who lived to be ninety, died in 1957 after an astonishingly active and productive career that was launched at age nineteen when he was called upon at the last minute to conduct a performance of *Aida* in Rio de Janeiro. His legacy was to raise the standards of both opera production and orchestral performance through exacting demands, like Wagner's, that a "performance" be conceived as a total work of art. Today's audiences can hardly appreciate the ahistorically high standards to which they have grown accustomed. Music seasons are now planned years in advance rather than produced ad hoc as circumstances of the moment may dictate. Audiences now sit quietly respectful, not walking, eating, talking, playing cards and flirting (to echo Sachs), while highly skilled musicians rehearse to a point of near perfection before going public. Toscanini early on made enemies by insisting on a dark theater for performances of *Tristan*, which prevented the customary disruptions from inattentive audiences otherwise engaged. When a defiant management turned up the lights, Toscanini smashed his own conductor's lamp in retaliation. As far back as 1897, Toscanini could write to his fiancée, "I am just now getting home after four and a quarter hours of rehearsal. I'm dead tired. I began at ten-thirty this morning, teaching a little solo in the third act [of *Tristan*] to the English horn player; at eleven-thirty I ate two eggs in a hurry and from noon on I rehearsed the orchestra alone; then at six I continued with the singers. In all, eleven hours of rehearsals for your poor Arturo." This scenario, hardly atypical, lasted well into his old age, when a feverish work schedule could be said to have kept him alive, because without it he fell into depression and despair over his art, his life, and the entire human race.

Toscanini's professional life involving his role as conductor at La Scala, at the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, the NBC Symphony, Bayreuth, and orchestras in England, Salzburg, Switzerland, Boston, Philadelphia, and South America is represented throughout, but the most compelling and extraordinary letters do not begin to appear until well into his early old age, a period, however, that commences early in the volume, about a third of the way through its 400 pages, as a result of the aforementioned cache of letters to Ada Mainardi that Sachs discovered in the early 1990s.

From these letters we learn of his constant anxiety about conducting, his sense of unworthiness and deficiency, almost crippling, until the moment he stepped before the orchestra, transcending time and place. He was plagued for much of his life by physical ailments, shoulder pains from conducting, gradually deteriorating eyesight, a bad knee. Married for sixty years to Carla de Martini, he was miserable with their relationship, particularly their early cessation of sex (possibly his greatest need). One experiences the sense of cosmic isolation expressed in his letters as an almost hysterical craving for sensual love and as a predisposition to

overstatement and extravagance generated by his needs of the moment (“I see black, everything black”). He constantly bemoaned his loss of privacy as he became more and more lionized worldwide, a celebrity as charismatic and fetishized as Elvis, hounded by upper-class groupies and corporate dignitaries who left him little time to himself. Despite his harshness and negativities, when he returned, after many years, as guest conductor for the New York Philharmonic and other orchestras for which he had been principal conductor, he was cheered by the players, who dismissed his requests for silence by continuing their ovation. He disliked publicity, never gave interviews, refused honorary awards and titles. He referred to the importunate executives who created the NBC Symphony expressly for him and lured him back to conducting in old age as “ferocious ball-breakers,” but he recognized his deep personal need to accept their offer. As a result of this life of frenzied activity, of endless sailings between Europe and America (which took ten days), a concert schedule beyond belief, of broadcasts and recording sessions, two world wars in which his role was far from negligible, the re-opening of La Scala after the second war, the new life he began in America with the NBC Symphony when he was already an old man, and the intense emotional strife he experienced through volatile clandestine relationships that he juggled around his marriage—as a result of this maelstrom of activity, he treasured his island retreat at Isolino San Giovanni in Italy, to which he returned whenever he could and felt repose and relief at his home in Riverdale on the Hudson when he was concertizing in New York. By the end of his life, he wrote one of his daughters, “I can’t stand being Arturo Toscanini any longer—at this point I’m bored with hearing my name—it’s been heard for many years, too many, and I would like to rest for what little time remains to me and enjoy a peaceful death.”

But all this having been said, several most important matters still remain. The first, Toscanini’s truly heroic resistance to fascism and his defense of the Jews, puts craven churches and states in a retrospective light for which the only word is “shameful.” Against such a background of pusillanimity, Toscanini comes off as all the more courageous. His resistance to Mussolini and Hitler started early, putting an end to his very brief tenure at Bayreuth, where he dazzled Wagner’s children with his conducting. But despite their warm reception, he backed out of further contracts there when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, actually sending an ambiguous letter hinting of his growing alarm to Hitler himself. For Wilhelm Furtwängler, who continued to accept government perquisites, he had only contempt. He referred to Mussolini and Hitler in his personal letters as the Delinquents, refusing to attend Fascist functions and speaking openly, according to Sachs, of Mussolini as “a tyrant and oppressor of Italy.” In the early thirties, Toscanini was physically assaulted by thugs in Bologna after his refusal to conduct the national anthem at a concert attended by two Fascist ministers, an incident followed by official disapproval that extended as

far as his passport being temporarily taken away. He felt his country was “infected, men are disgusting worms. . . . I think of those poor young men who are going off, fooled or forced, to get themselves killed in Spain . . . for delinquents named Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin.” As the years of horror between the wars worsened, he gradually pulled out of concertizing in Italy and Austria in addition to Germany, finally leaving Italy altogether on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, when again his passport was taken away and, according to Sachs, he was under “virtual house arrest,” with his telephones being tapped. “I feel that we are heading toward terrible, tragic days [he wrote to Ada in 1938]. It’s a horrible thing to say, but to free ourselves from those Monsters who have subverted, degraded, and most shamefully enslaved millions and millions of beings, we’ve almost come to the point of wanting war. . . .” When his passport was returned (his fame elicited all sorts of pressures), he immediately took off for Switzerland in a harrowing train journey with his wife, during which he was intercepted by Italian border police to be raked over the coals, slipping through at the last possible minute to catch his connecting train to freedom. He did not return to Italy until after the war.

But well before the funnel cloud of the Holocaust appeared on the horizon he visited, at age sixty-nine, what was then called Palestine to conduct what later became the Israel Philharmonic, and he described himself as an “honorary Jew.” To Ada he wrote, “You hurt me when you say that you don’t love the Jews. Tell me, rather, that you don’t love the human race! Jews or Catholics, Protestants or Anglicans, men are all the same! Nasty and selfish!” As Sachs reports, both Toscanini and his wife helped Jewish friends and musicians “in a variety of moral and material ways,” providing affidavits for some of them when it would advance their careers. In a 1938 letter to Ada Mainardi, Toscanini writes: “When you think about this tragic destruction of the Jewish population of Austria, it makes your blood turn cold. Think of what a prominent part they’ve played in Vienna’s life for two centuries! . . . Today, with all the great progress of our civilization, none of the so-called liberal nations is making a move. England, France, and the United States are silent!”

The second big theme that runs through these 700 letters—and the one Sachs feared would dominate everything else in the press—has to do with Toscanini’s sexuality and his so-called “pornographic” letters to Ada Mainardi. Sexuality for the twenty-first century is what piety was for the twelfth: an obsessive *idée fixe* into which almost everything gets translated. So it seems a veritable gift of the *Zeitgeist* that a thousand superheated letters to Mainardi should have surfaced in the nineties, well after Sachs had produced his then definitive biography. Toscanini had affairs with a large number of women who crossed his path—not quite Don Giovanni’s *mille e tre* but an eye-popping list nonetheless of singers, spouses, and hangers-on, enough to make him the Warren Beatty of the twentieth-century-classical-music world. Sachs tells us that reading these impassioned letters eventually became repetitious and boring, inducing him to include only a small sample, although one is

inclined to say that the sample is definitely large enough. As for “pornographic,” the word seems inappropriate to a contemporary world in which sexually explicit materials of all sorts have become essential ingredients of our daily nutriment, whether disseminated from the Oval Office, TV, DVDs, or the astonishing sexual cornucopia of the Web. “Pornography” has now become so naturalized that the very category itself may soon be obsolete. In this light, the scandal of Toscanini’s kinky letters becomes just one more instance of the familiar phony innocence immortalized by Swift in “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” where the swain, Strephon, is shocked to discover the repulsive cosmetics and bodily filth that lie behind his girlfriend’s glamour: “Disgusted Strephon stole away / Repeating in his amorous fits, / ‘Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!’” Since we normally don’t have access to other people’s personal letters, when we do see them we are like children stunned to learn that their parents “do it.”

The first major affair represented in this collection took place between Toscanini and Elsa Kurzbauer, to whom he wrote (in English, with errors retained). “I am hungry, thirsty of you—of your kisses[.] I hanker after your mouth, lips and your little dearest self. I love you. I long for all you[.] I dote on you. My eyes, my mind, are gloating upon your little, girlisch body. I will kiss it. I will kiss, caress its most hidden corners. I shall find out some precious nook still unrevealed.” But the most consuming passion, for Ada Mainardi, lasted in full intensity for four years, when she was 36 and he was 66. Although he had known her and her husband Enrico for years, he a renowned cellist and she a pianist, 1933 was the eruptive moment. Their actual meetings were infrequent because of constant travels, presence of spouses, etc., which may have contributed to so long a retention of the highest heat of lust. Toscanini lamented repeatedly that he lacked the courage to make a break with his wife Carla in order to link up with Ada, which he believed might have effected a beneficial transformation of his life. Flush from their first actual physical sex, he wrote her an ecstatic note, after which she played a significant part in the intensity of Toscanini’s musical performances. “I’ve just this moment returned from the rehearsal. I rehearsed Iberia [Debussy]. The music’s sensuality made my blood rush every which way. Oh, give me, give me! [This expression was Ada’s exclamation at orgasm.] No sooner did I reach the hotel than I got your letter! Do you understand now why I am writing in blood???” This was no figure of speech: not only did he literally write to her in his own blood, but he repeatedly elicited from her (by mail) handkerchiefs stained with her menstrual blood as well as pubic hairs that he referred to as flowers from her garden, tokens that he carried in his pocket and fingered during orchestral performances. “I received our Holy Shroud just as I was going up the stairs in the Musikverein. I conducted the concert with it jealously hidden in my pocket, and it was a real inspiration.” But he had misgivings: “Oh Ada, I feel that you love me less than before, since I forced you to send me that diaphanous veil [blood-soaked handkerchief]. You have judged me to be what I am not and

have never been, a degenerate. . . . To have you, to live near you, to have no other human being near, to love you, to adore you, to be your slave. Ada, I suffer, I suffer, and I love you. Oh, how I love you. Give me your mouth and all of you." Signed, Artù.

This "inferno loose in [his] bloodstream" produced letter after letter filled with ardor as well as accusations of Ada's insufficient love. "Tell me that you were pleased with me [when he conducted *The Magic Flute*], that I am worthy of being loved by you, my soul, my life, my all. Your love will keep me forever young and in love with my art." What is so astounding about these letters is not so much their "pornography" as their repetitiveness, on and on in this vein, sometimes daily, for four years. How did Ada bear it, when the mere reader of this selection wants to scream, "Enough already!"? And what did they really mean after all, since the hyperbolic effect they produce is of a metaphor for something cosmically else?

But the real shocker with regard to Toscanini's libido, the knockout blow in this entire collection of more than 700 letters, is the long letter he wrote to Elsa Kurzbauer, his lover of years before, in 1939 when they were both living in New York and he was seventy-two. Seeing little future remaining in his long-distance relationship with Ada after four years of feverish adoration, without missing a beat he could write to Elsa with the very echo of Ada's ecstasies: "Can you still love me a little[?] . . . I still love you and desire you even more intensely. . . . Give me, give me everything, let me kiss your whole adorable little body. . . . I love you as I never loved you before, and you delight me more than any other woman. . . . You drive me crazy with desire and make me do absurd things that are inconceivable for an old man like me! . . . Call me Tuesday afternoon. . . . Don't lose time. Maybe before long God will take away even the little bit of virility that's left me. And then? What misery!"

But what does this titanic figure still have to offer the twenty-first century? Besides the musical/historical legacy described above, we have a huge cache of recordings, starting in the 1920s and ending in the early fifties, still largely available in cleaned-up transfers from 78s to CDs. Of these, connoisseurs seem to prefer the performances with the New York Philharmonic from the thirties. Toscanini's conducting style through most of his career was taut, lean, kinetic, precise, most successful and celebrated in music of the classical period through Beethoven and Rossini, though he could pull off a stunning *La Mer* and *Pines of Rome*. His performances of Brahms are powerful, though somewhat dry and hard, without the lush, slightly unfocused quality the music demands—and receives from, say, the Vienna Philharmonic. (The acoustics of his recordings are almost uniformly dry, not only in the notorious Studio 8H, from which he broadcast, but even in recordings made in Carnegie Hall, which conspicuously lack the hall's celebrated ambience.) He is most famous for his feverish accounts of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth, and his recording of the Seventh with the New York Philharmonic in the thirties is regarded as a landmark. These older recordings, miraculously, can be heard without charge on the website run by Naxos

(www.naxos.com), which has engineered a large series of remasterings of classic Toscanini performances, mostly not yet available in the U.S. but listenable in their entirety, even at 28.8 kbps, without buffering interruptions on this remarkable site. Since the 78s were lo-fi to begin with, there is little loss from narrow bandwidths.

A search on the Web (with Google or Yahoo Shopping) for Toscanini yields an immense discography, including recently remastered-yet-again recordings from the early fifties on RCA/BMG. The set of Beethoven symphonies is memorable, the set of Schubert and Mendelssohn too brutal and sonically constricted for my taste (for Mendelssohn, the Dohnányi sets on Decca with the Vienna Philharmonic are beyond compare). Terry Teachout offers one of his customary excellent articles, followed by a selective Toscanini discography, in the July 2002 *Commentary*, to which I refer readers wanting further, more enthusiastic, and expert opinion.<sup>2</sup>

But it remains to consider that a great deal has happened in the music world since the early 1950s. Other conductors, such as Szell and Boulez, have absorbed the lean Toscanini style; and the art and technology of sound recordings, from stereo to digital and more, have enhanced the sensuous reality of listening to musical simulacra. Unless you are the sort of person who is as happy reading a score as listening to a performance (and with a score it is, after all, *your* performance that you are listening to), old mono recordings now generally seem inadequate.<sup>3</sup> Around the time of Toscanini's last sessions, the unprecedented flood of LPs began to flow, with more recordings, orchestras, soloists, conductors, and composers being disseminated than ever before. The CD era has produced a similar outpouring, even with the curtailment of classical recording in the United States. The contribution of Naxos alone has been phenomenal, not to mention their price of seven dollars. Thus, the sheer variety and availability of cheap, portable, and splendid classical recordings, even as the death of such music keeps being forecast, finds us in a cultural situation vastly different from what existed in 1950 when the lone recording of Mahler's Fifth Symphony by Bruno Walter entailed heaving a ponderous album of many shellac disks onto a record changer for a performance interrupted every five minutes. Today, I doubt that there is a single Toscanini recording I would recommend as essential daily bread to anyone asking my advice, since the options are so great (but one should surely own at least a few of these memorable recordings). Even the Carlos Kleiber recordings from the seventies of Beethoven's

<sup>2</sup> I must acknowledge special gratitude to my friend Neil Jacobowitz of the CUNY Graduate Center for his generous gift of a pile of Toscanini CDs on learning of my involvement with these letters.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these old mono recordings have been substantially improved in their transfers to CD and some are quite good. For example, the 1953 recording of the *Missa Solemnis* comes off surprisingly well, with a spacious sound that could almost pass as stereo. On the whole, however, orchestral sound tends to be seriously constricted on these old recordings.

Fifth and Seventh, now on one CD with spacious stereo sound and first rank conducting, would be preferable, I think, to any of the Toscaninis, which now seem much less indispensable in the repertoire they cover than, say, Landowska's old recordings of Scarlatti and the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which are entirely sui generis, even with wow, flutter, and anti-aircraft artillery firing in the background of her 1940s Paris '78s of Scarlatti. No one can quite match those performances, despite several excellent versions since. But I can't say the same about Toscanini, whose lessons have apparently been learned and naturalized only too well and whose style is more easily imitated than the art and timbre of a great voice or soloist. For it's the fate of world-class innovators to transform the way we experience reality even as we gradually lose consciousness of their genius—while benefiting from their gifts without gratitude.