

Reflections on Toscanini

By Harvey Sachs. 191pp. New York: Grove Weidenfeld. 1991. \$19.95.

By Steven Richman

Harvey Sachs' 1978 biography, *Toscanini*, is recognized as the definitive book on the most famous and arguably the greatest conductor of the 20th, and perhaps any century. Sachs' *Reflections on Toscanini* is equally excellent, intelligently written and well-researched. It includes expanded chapters on Toscanini's defiance of Mussolini, based on recently discovered government files from Italy, and the conductor's historic appearances at Bayreuth and subsequent withdrawal from that and the Salzburg Festival in the 1930s. An additional chapter, "Misunderstanding Toscanini," repudiates the distorted and revisionist 1987 book by Joseph Horowitz. And a final chapter, "Listening to Toscanini," presents a fascinating analysis, by a trained musician, in the form of a detailed comparison of seven recordings by historical conductors of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, including two by the Maestro.

It is a great pleasure to read Sachs' book, which has no hidden agenda, and conveys clarity, honesty and a desire to present only the facts, without any of the sensationalism and tabloid mentality which pervades so much contemporary writing. Sachs, a conductor born in Cleveland and who resides in Italy, has also written the fine jacket notes for the recent videotape and videodisk releases of the historic Toscanini Television Concerts, originally broadcast from 1948 to 1952. (See my article, "The Toscanini Video Legacy" in the upcoming issue of *HPR*.)

In his introduction, Sachs says, "Toscanini is the conductor whose recorded performances stimulate, convince, and move me more often than those of any other conductor, and I consider him the most original and gripping performing musician I have heard...and I have no reason or desire to proselytize — much less to indulge in the childish game of 'Who's Greater Than Whom.'" This attitude strikes me as true and refreshingly apt.

Many of those who find Toscanini's performances fast and inflexible are acquainted only with recordings made at the very end of a nearly 70-year career of international operatic and symphonic conducting. For instance, the Beethoven Symphony cycle from the early '50s, released on RCA records and now on compact disc, is quite different in approach from a live cycle from 1939, both with the NBC Symphony. The latter appeared on "pirate" vinyl discs from the Arturo Toscanini Society in the '70s and now are sporadically available on CD. These have the characteristic drive and drama but show a greater flexibility of tempo and phrasing sometimes missing from the Maestro's later efforts.

As Sachs rightly observes, the unique quality of the conductor's approach derives in part from a constantly changing, never stagnating attempt to realize the truth contained in each work of art. Each performance of a given composition was an artistically whole structure, entirely fresh and different from earlier ones. I can vouch for that, having a half dozen recordings of Toscanini conducting the Meistersinger Prelude to Act I, each of which is a great entity unto itself, but special and unique. Toscanini's performances, according to the conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni, who heard most of the Scala productions during the 1920s, were "always in a state of flux as a result of his conviction that a great musical text is never merely a substance to be poured out, but rather a living organism." Gavazzeni, writing in 1974, noted the "evolutionary quality of his operation, which was tireless, never sated, never still." One marvels at this phenomenon who continued his never-ending quest from the 1880s through the 1950s!

In a cogent discussion of conductors of the 20th century (among others, Monteux, Furtwängler, Stokowski, Bernstein, Karajan), Sachs says, "The vast visual diffusion of Bernstein's exhibitionistic gestures and Karajan's power-exuding ones has done much to corrupt the relationship

between conductor and orchestra and between orchestra and audience." Even critics have succumbed to this "Great Performances" mentality. In Sachs' opinion, "Karajan and Bernstein conducted the audience as well as the orchestra." Mention is made of Stravinsky's comment that many modern conductors present a "performance of a performance," mimicking the drama of the music and manipulating the power of the orchestra with thunderbolts of dramatic gestures and cues to the musicians. In marked contrast, Toscanini's podium deportment was a lesson in restraint, elegance and clarity, solely for the benefit of the musicians and the music. It was the venerable British conductor Sir Adrian Boult who wrote, "Almost all the great conductors of the past stood absolutely still," and he saw them all, from Richter on.

In the highly informative chapter, "Toscanini and Mussolini," the author clarifies the conductor's role in opposing the Fascist government in Italy. Recent access to government files has revealed that a dossier of over 500 pages existed on Toscanini (more than all other musicians and musical institutions combined). This included telephone and mail surveillance, as well as spying on the Maestro's "anti-government" activities from the 1920s through the '40s, both in Italy and abroad. After WWI, Toscanini had been persuaded, though he was apolitical, to run on the Socialist Party ticket in Italy along with Mussolini, a fact he regretted bitterly for the rest of his life. They were soundly defeated, but later on Il Duce took a very different political stance from the one he had espoused in 1919.

Toscanini was the most famous and effective resistor to the Fascists, refusing to play their anthem at his performances. In an infamous incident in 1931, he was assaulted by Fascists previous to a performance in Bologna, provoking an international protest, such was the conductor's universal esteem. After his passport was withheld and other harassment carried out personally by Mussolini, Toscanini was forced into voluntary exile. From his American home, he helped many to escape to the United States, including Friedelind Wagner, the renegade granddaughter of the composer. This chapter gives the lie to those who falsely accused Toscanini of complicity, an ironic twist of reality given the fact that he strongly stood up to pressure and was looked to as a leader by many artists who sought his advice such as Bruno Walter and Lotte Lehmann.

"Toscanini, Hitler and Salzburg" documents the conductor's historic performances at Bayreuth in the 1930s. Among many legendary conductors such as Muck, Richter, Strauss and von Bulow, Toscanini was singled out by no less than the Wagner family itself as being the definitive interpreter of Wagner's art. But when the Bayreuth Festival, which Toscanini regarded as a holy shrine and for which he donated his services, came under the thrall of Nazism, he refused to conduct. And when Austria began to buckle under the same pressures, the conductor was the first to disassociate himself from the Salzburg Festival. As Sachs says, "Of how many public figures has this ever been true when the going was rough?" This historic story needs to be told and retold as a tribute to the man whose courage was as notable as his exemplary musicianship.

We can only grieve that this selfless quest for truth and integrity is sorely lacking in contemporary music-making. For Toscanini was a phenomenon not easily repeated, especially in the highly commercialized, rarely artistically oriented music business that has evolved. Bravo to BMG Classics (RCA) for releasing the complete commercial recordings, available singly and in a new 82-CD set, and the equally (if not more so) priceless videos of the television concerts.

"Formerly the way to show one's understanding was to praise [Toscanini], today it is to find fault with him; and the attacks reveal as little understanding of the Toscanini operation and what it produced as did most of the praise." These words were written by B.H. Haggin in 1959, two years after the Maestro's death, and are equally meaningful today. Harvey Sachs' marvelous book does much to dispel the myths and nonsense which have accumulated of late. I recommend it unequivocally to all who know little or to those who are well acquainted with Toscanini. It is an invaluable resource to help "clear the air" concerning one of the true giants of western music and culture. □