



Toscanini

Beethoven: Missa Solemnis



Outside of opera there have been, when all is said and done, two musical events which tower over everything that has happened in concert halls of New York this season. The first was the performance of Arturo Toscanini of the Verdi Requiem, some weeks ago in Carnegie Hall. The second was the performance that he directed in the same hall last night of Beethoven's D major Mass, with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the Westminster Choir, and an uncommonly well coordinated quartet of distinguished soloists.

If the performance of the mass surpassed that of the requiem in intensity and in grandeur, it is because, after all, there are few compositions in all music that stand shoulder to shoulder with Beethoven's. It does compass the sublime, in a spirit that is Michelangelesque. But it is seldom delivered in this fashion, because of difficulties almost insurmountable for the singers, and other difficulties, inherent in the nature of the music, which conductors seldom completely solve. Last night the fierce heat of Toscanini's inspiration and integrity of purpose pierced every problem and fused together the creative elements of a masterpiece so gigantic that it is seldom comprehended by either listener or performer.

It is only by a special exercise of the creative will and the prescience of an heroic spirit that such a height is reached. And we believe that only the tragedy of the world today, felt as profoundly as Toscanini feels it, could have moved him to such a deed. We can be certain that he is not unmindful of what Beethoven put in the score that interrupts the tender concluding Agnus Dei with the sounds of war and the supplications for peace.

The Mass was given with a loftiness and almost a grim intensity of purpose which forbade anything hut the greatest utterance. When the end came the audience remained for a long time, some respectfully refraining from demonstration, others applauding loud and long. Very properly the conductor did not return to the stage, from which he hurried when the last note had sounded.

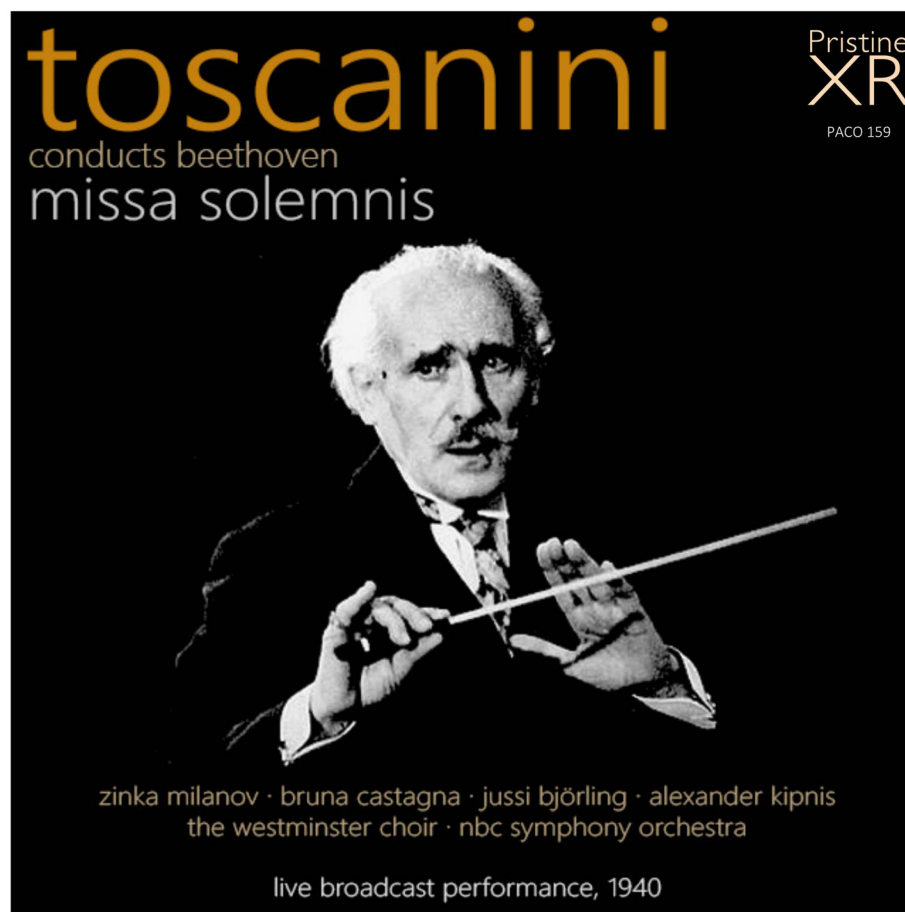
We have heard choruses ere this perform miracles when driven to them by Toscanini, and quartets, too. He has the qualities of the prophet and seer aflame with his vision, and the clear thinking and firm unshakable hand of the master. When he took the most complex passages at a rate apparently reckless of every purpose save the one of complete achievement, the young singers followed him with unbounded faith and ardor.

But they and their trainers deserve credit for a rarely beautiful as well as virtuoso performance. The B-flats and Bs too came out high and clear. There was a remarkably varied scale of dynamics. Pianissimos seemed to echo mysteriously from afar; fortissimos rang out like the trump of judgment day. But more remarkable was the treatment of the counterpoint, the expressiveness of the inner voices, the interweaving of the choral and orchestral parts, and, always, the white heat of the vision.

What has been said of the chorus holds true in principle also of the solo quartet, consisting of Zinka Milanov, soprano; Bruna Castagna, contralto; Jussi Björling, tenor, and Alexander Kipnis, bass. These singers also had tasks of great difficulty, discharged with somewhat varying degrees of success, but as a whole done so well that it would be invidious to make detailed distinctions. Miss Milanov and Mr. Kipnis were particularly effective.

The performance was given for the benefit of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The hall was packed. It is good to think that thanks to the radio the message of the Mass was made known to millions who listened in other places. They, too, received the heritage of Beethoven.

Olin Downes, The New York Times, 29 December 1940



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BEETHOVEN MISSA SOLEMNIS
TOSCANINI, MILANOV, CASTAGNA, BJÖRLING, KIPNIS, WESTMINSTER CHOIR, NBC SO

toscanini

conducts beethoven

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photograph of Toscanini

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BEETHOVEN Missa Solemnis in D major, Op. 123

1. Kyrie. Assai sostenuto (10:49)
2. Gloria. Allegro vivace (16:56)
3. Credo. Allegro ma non troppo (18:20)
4. Sanctus. Adagio (18:02)
5. Agnus Dei. Adagio (15:49)

Zinka Milanov, soprano
Bruna Castagna, contralto
Jussi Björling, tenor
Alexander Kipnis, bass

The Westminster Choir
directed by John Finley Williamson

NBC Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

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