

TOSCANINI'S 1949 NBC AÏDA

"PASSING his eighty-second birthday, Mr. Toscanini has afforded the audience of the nation, and we hope of even wider areas, a consummative example of interpretation in his broadcast performance in two parts of Verdi's "Aida," completed yesterday afternoon in Radio City. Thanks enough can hardly be given the National Broadcasting Company which made such a performance available to every listener with a radio or television set at his disposal, wherever he might happen to be.

It is not this winter's belief that any radio transmission can catch completely the innermost nuance or pulsation of such a performance, which is to be experienced completely only perhaps by those within actual earshot. Something is denatured in the transmission, to say nothing of the fact that it is still necessary, as we understand it—knowing nothing whatever of the technical process—to limit the sonorous range from very soft to very loud in any broadcasting. These limitations, though they lessen every year, do inhere in radio transmission.

On the other hand, such is the power in the province of the art which we ourselves are incapable of regarding as anything but the supreme art of them all—the art of music—that the thought and emotion back of the notes responsible for their projection come through unmistakably. The listener must sense strongly the creative impulsion of such a Toscanini interpretation. Whatever the acoustical boundaries, if the listener is at all sensitive himself he is likely to "get it." He may not get the complete impression that he does if he sits in Studio 8H, but he will be caught in the evocative power of such a recreation of music."

Olin Downes, *New York Times*, 3 April 1949

The opening paragraphs of Olin Downes' essay on Toscanini's 1949 NBC *Aida* express, in the kindest possible way, his frustration at the inability of a contemporary radio broadcast to reproduce the experience of hearing the performance in real life (the article is reproduced in full on our website).

It's the eternal quest both of the hi-fi buff or audiophile, and the recording producers and engineers whose work aims to bring the listener as close as possible to the "real thing", whatever that may actually be - one person's perception somewhere in the upper tiers of an opera house will inevitably differ considerably to that of the conductor in the orchestra pit. Toscanini famously desired the kind of bone dry acoustic he was almost certainly used to in the opera houses he'd spent his life working in, something modern ears often struggle with.

Any recording therefore includes a degree of artifice - we are no more able to visit the Studio 8H of 1949 today than most listeners could in 1949. Instead my aim is to offer a somewhat idealised sound to this recording - a sense of dimensional air around the performers in the absence of true stereo, a correctional equalisation to overcome the shortcomings of 1940s recording equipment, and so on. Hopefully as a result of this we can get closer than ever to Olin Downes' "innermost nuance or pulsation of such a performance".

Andrew Rose



disc one (75:57)

1. *Prelude* (3:14)

ACT ONE

2. Sì: corre voce che l'Etiope (1:30)
3. Se quel guerrier ... Celeste Aida (4:16)
4. Quale insolita gioia nel tuo sguardo! (2:23)
5. Dessa! (1:25)
6. Ohimé! Di guerra fremere (1:52)
7. Alta cagion v'aduna (1:13)
8. Il sacro suolo dell'Egitto é invaso (1:57)
9. Su! Del Nilo al sacro lido (2:28)
10. Ritorna vincitor! (6:07)
11. Possente Fthà! (3:06)
12. *Sacred Dance Of The Priestesses* (2:03)
13. Mortal, dilet to ai numi (1:00)
14. Nume, custode e vindice (4:27)

ACT TWO

15. Chi mai fra gl'inni a i plausi (2:30)
16. *Dance Of The Moorish Slaves* (1:29)
17. Vieni: sul crin ti piovano (0:42)
18. Silenzio! Aida verso noi s'avaza (5:37)
19. Pietà, ti prenda del mo dolor (1:46)
20. Su! Del Nilo al scaro lido (2:20)
21. Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside (3:25)
22. *March And Ballet* (5:52)
23. Vieni, o guerriero vindice (2:22)
24. Salvator della patria (1:17)
25. Concedi in pria (0:44)
26. Che veggo! Egli? Mio padre! (0:51)
27. Quest'assisa chio vesto vi dica (0:58)
28. Ma tu, re, tu, signore possente (3:46)
29. O re, pei sacri numi (2:16)
30. Gloria all'Egitto, ad Iside (1:10)
31. Fa' cor: della tua patria (1:55)

disc two (59:46)

ACT THREE

1. O tu, che sei d'Osiride (2:12)
2. Vieni d'Iside al tempio (2:08)
3. Qui Radamès verrà! (1:39)
4. O patria mia (4:39)
5. Ciel! Mio padre! (1:06)
6. Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate (1:32)
7. In armi ora si desta il popol nostro (2:27)
8. Padre! A costoro schiava non sono (2:10)
9. Pur ti riveggo, mia dolce Aida (1:20)
10. Nel fiero anelito di nuova guerra (1:40)
11. Fuggiam Gli ardori inospiti (3:46)
12. Aida! - Tu non m'ami (0:29)
13. Ah no! Fuggiamo! (1:20)
14. Ma, dimmi (2:05)
15. Traditor (1:02)

ACT FOUR

16. L'abborrita rivale a me sfuggia (1:22)
17. Io l'amo, io l'amo sempre! (1:33)
18. Già i sacerdoti adunansi (2:02)
19. Ah! Tu dei vivere! (2:42)
20. Chi ti salva, sciagurato (1:44)
21. Ohimé! Morir mi sento (2:10)
22. Spirto del nume, sovra noi discendi! (1:39)
23. Radamès! Radamès! Radamès! (3:10)
24. A lui vivo la tomba! (3:23)
25. La fatal pietra sovra me si chiuse (2:11)
26. Presago il core della tua condanna (2:07)
27. Vedi? Di morte l'angelo (1:41)
28. O terra, addio (4:27)

NBC Symphony Orchestra
Robert Shaw Chorale
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Aida – Herva Nelli
Amneris – Eva Gustavson
Radamès – Richard Tucker
Amonasro – Giuseppe Valdegno
Il Re (Pharoah) – Dennis Harbour
Ramfis – Norman Scott
Un Messaggero – Virginio Assandri
Sacerdotessa – Teresa Stich-Randall

Robert Shaw Chorale
directed by Robert Shaw

NBC Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

Live broadcast recordings,
26 March (Acts 1 & 2)
& 2 April (Acts 3 & 4), 1949

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Toscanini conducting Aida, an AI
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