

Toscanini

The 1939 Beethoven Cycle, Volume 1



Mr. Toscanini conducted the first program of the "Beethoven Festival" of the NBC Symphony Orchestra last night in Radio City. He has seldom given a more impressive demonstration of his capacity to make very familiar music fall so freshly and significantly upon the senses and the mind that the hearer listens to something he has known from childhood with the emotion of unending discovery. We heard three staples of the symphonic repertory: the overture to "Fidelio"; the First symphony; the "Eroica" — these three, and one would say that within the dimensions of two minor works and one which is an ultimate of musical creation — the "Eroica" — he had traversed the immensities of art and the whole sublime trajectory of the spirit of Beethoven.

The smallest phrase, under such circumstances, communicates the sense of the entire work of which it is an integral part. Because it is ideally conveyed, in both its formal and emotional essence, it is hardly less in itself than the sum of all. And this holds true, whether the score be that of the less pretentious Beethoven, or the utterance of the matchless hero who produced the greatest symphony the world yet has known, the "Eroica." Everything in the concert was unforgettable. Everything, in a sense, was equal under the eyes of a man who is himself a hero of his art as well as a genius.

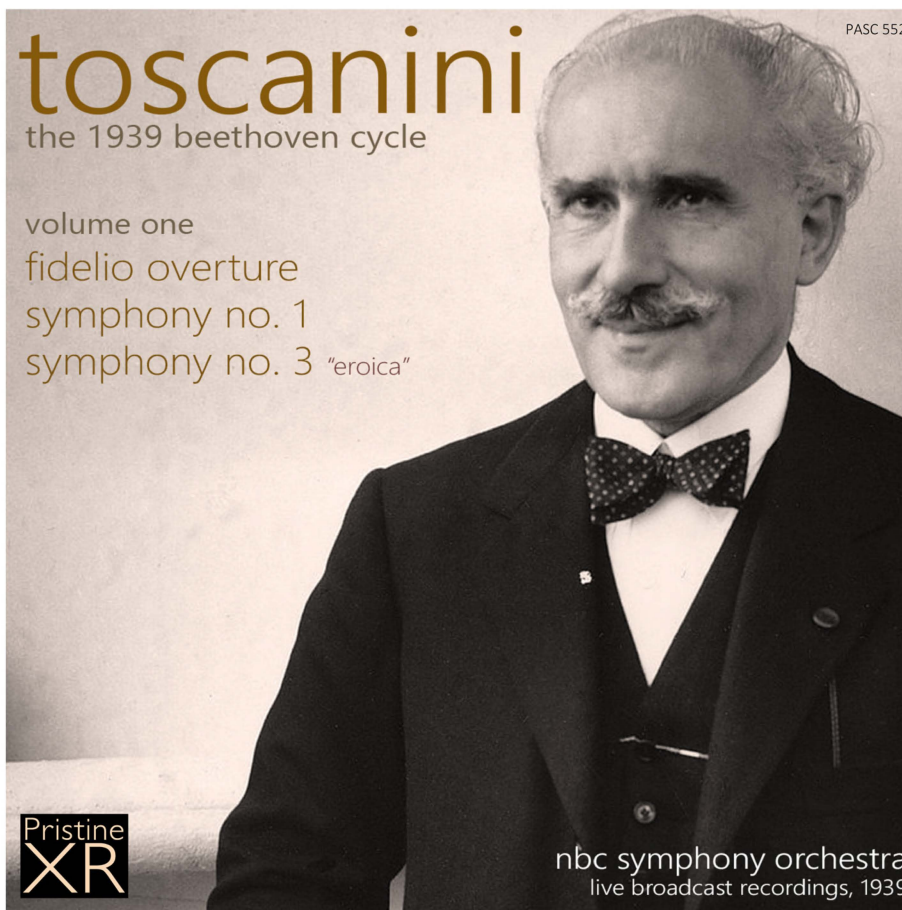
At the same time, the special relation of the "Fidelio" overture to the opera whose name it bears was made clear as seldom before. It was played for just what it is: essentially an eighteenth century overture, on the Italian model (though enlarged by Beethoven's quality) and very much influenced by Cherubini, who, however, wrote some greater overtures on these lines for his own operas. What Mr. Toscanini accomplished was his customary revelation of musicianship and infallible intuition. He held the overture precisely and with an almost magical fidelity to its style and its spiritual proportions.

In the same way, on a grander plane, and of course with much more contrast and variety of manner, was interpreted the youthful and wonderful First symphony. Its beauty and concision constitute in themselves a monument to the master who thus approached the task of the Michelangelo of the Nine. It is to be suspected that this early Beethoven symphony has a special place in Mr. Toscanini's heart. Or was it merely that with the overture it took the proper amount of time, and no more, in a concert that was to unfold the immensities of the "Eroica"? At any rate, the performance of the First symphony was now transfigured song, and now a piece of both homophonic and polyphonic writing as chiselled and aristocratic in its exposition as though we were hearing the finest chamber music.

All this was well conceived prelude, in Beethoven's lighter vein, to the tragic heights of the "Eroica." The symphony said so much partly because the interpreter was as sparing of pseudo-dramatics or ostentatious gesture as the creator of the symphony himself. It was properly titanic thinking and feeling. If one movement was more eloquent than the others it was the funeral march, which perhaps was inevitable in a performance that so completely matched the quality of the music. The pace of the march never sagged; only in two or three places was there the slight variations of tempo, the stress of phrase, which made that accent and fluctuation so much more moving than a succession of such effects would have been.

Mr. Toscanini drove all that home, so that one was abashed in the presence of Beethoven's brooding spirit, and aware of this fateful time in the world, and the immutable eternities. To all of which, thus carved and hewn from invisibility, the "Eroica" seemed the one and only answer.

Olin Downes, The New York Times, 29 October 1939 (edited - full version online, together with producer's note)



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TOSCANINI THE 1939 BEETHOVEN CYCLE VOLUME 1: SYMPHONIES 1 & 3, FIDELIO OVERTURE
TOSCANINI, NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

toscanini

the 1939 beethoven cycle volume 1

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photograph of Toscanini

Broadcast of 28 October, 1939
NBC Studio 8H, Radio City, New York

Total duration: 79:00

1. RADIO Opening announcement (0:33)
2. BEETHOVEN Fidelio, Op. 72 - Overture (7:19)
3. 1st mvt. - Adagio molto – Allegro con brio (8:04)
4. 2nd mvt. - Andante cantabile con moto (6:20)
5. 3rd mvt. - Minuet. Allegro molto e vivace - Trio (3:14)
6. 4th mvt. - Finale. Adagio – Allegro molto e vivace (5:38)

BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 1 in C, Op. 21

7. RADIO Midway announcements (1:05)

BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 3 in E flat, Op. 55 "Eroica"

8. 1st mvt. - Allegro con brio (13:50)
9. 2nd mvt. - Marcia funebre. Adagio assai (16:21)
10. 3rd mvt. - Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio (5:24)
11. 4th mvt. - Finale. Allegro molto (10:36)

12. RADIO Closing announcement (0:36)

NBC Symphony Orchestra
conducted by Arturo Toscanini

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