

TOSCANINI

BY ALEXANDER W. WILLIAMS

I

WHETHER we like it or not, it is the orchestral conductor who has become the important central figure of any musical community. In Europe to-day the conductor is clearly of greater stature than either composer or impresario. In Germany, for example, Furtwängler has more power than Hindemith; and if Richard Strauss is still a towering figure it is not only owing to his compositions, but also, in some degree, to his extensive career as a conductor. In England a realist would say that Sir Thomas Beecham was more influential than Vaughan Williams, the distinguished composer laureate. In America we bow even more completely to the conductor. No orchestral or concert manager in any city has the sphere of influence that is the scope of Mr. Koussevitzky, Mr. Stokowski, Mr. Stock, Mr. Rodzinski. In a city of the size and varied activity of New York it might be a question to determine who was the leading musical citizen, though most people would decide for the conductor of the Philharmonic. As for the composer, he need not apply.

Charles Martin Loeffler was for years a celebrated resident on the Boston scene; but it would be a bold man who would say that his influence was wider than that of Dr. Muck, Mr. Monteux, or Mr. Koussevitzky. Eugene Goossens is a well-known composer, but his significance to Cincinnati is as conductor of the local orchestra.

It is by no means a desirable situation

that has grown up in this connection, nor are we the better off because the satellites of the musical world must revolve around the conductor. Conducting, in the sense we know it to-day, did not begin until the nineteenth century. The interest of the crowd for a long time centred on the singer, the virtuoso, the composer, perhaps even the music itself! Mendelssohn was in a way the first star conductor, but his work in this field was a direct outcome of his prominence as a composer. The position of artists like Liszt, Paganini, Jenny Lind, the Schumanns, and others, for some time outshone that of the mere conductor.

Later in the nineteenth century, with the solid establishment of first-class orchestras in Europe and this country, the star conductor climbed into the saddle, where he has remained secure. As time has gone on, more and more orchestras have been founded, so that the supremacy of the conductor is as firm as a very strong current of fashion can make it. Of all practitioners in this field, none has ever held so unusual a position as Arturo Toscanini. This is the first time that a conductor — and not one who is equally distinguished as a composer — has won the prestige of being the world's most famous musician. His career has been no flash in the pan, for he has enjoyed this reputation for some time. And, whereas there are many who complain that a conductor's usefulness is exaggerated, there is no question of the unanimous respect reserved for Toscanini.

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His influence is astounding. It is no secret that the Salzburg Festival leans heavily on him as its principal drawing card or that the New York Philharmonic has had hard sledding since his departure in 1936. He can do just about what he wants. He can have as many rehearsals, regardless of expense, as he feels are necessary to maintain his high standards of performance. He can refuse to conduct in Germany or Italy on the grounds that he disapproves of certain political actions. He can abruptly leave one post for another without laying careful plans ahead. In short, he is his own law.

Toscanini is an exceptionally sincere artist and a thorough musician, which is a guarantee that his idealism is no empty pose incapable of being realized. People, especially members of an orchestra, may gossip about some directors and whisper that they are no more than humbugs; but no such slander is ever breathed against Toscanini. He has a marvelous ability to get the best out of musicians, to inspire them to play above themselves. He is passionately intense in rehearsal, though deceptively stolid at the actual concert. He has no superficial tricks of showmanship and is, if anything, an awkward figure on the stand. He has a certain nobility of expression — high forehead, prominent nose, moustache that might once have been fierce, and receding hair; and these features are transfused with a personality that quickly communicates itself to an audience. He probably is not untidy, but he gives the impression, with his dark clothes and a bow tie that is neither straggling nor precise, that his thoughts are above dress. And that, incidentally, is not a bad impression to create.

He conducts without a score, because of his extraordinary memory and his poor eyesight. His gestures are vigorous, sometimes almost whirling, and you would not call them graceful. His attitude is invariably modest in the face of tumults of applause, which he seems to accept as something quite unwarranted

and to wish to share with the orchestra rather than take wholly on his own shoulders. Altogether his is an appealing personality before the public, and in private it is said to be no less so, with perhaps a more immediate feeling of unworldliness. He was born in 1867 in Parma, which lies in a section of Italy that has a long musical tradition. Verdi was born not far off in the village of Busseto. The elder Toscanini was a tailor, who had fought under Garibaldi. He seems to have been an intelligent man. The son, at any rate, was free to study music and was not hampered by social obstacles which are sometimes advanced by parents against a career in the arts. He entered the conservatory at Parma at the age of nine and graduated in 1885. He was an exceedingly good student and got the highest possible marks in both cello and composition. Some of his songs were published; but he has never tried seriously to be a composer, unless he has done so in secret. He went to Turin to play the cello in the orchestra for the exposition concerts. We have no evidence that at this period he entertained the notion of becoming a conductor, but, with his good record, it was easy enough for him to get a steady orchestral job. This, as a matter of fact, he proceeded to do.

In the spring of 1886 he went to Brazil, still as a cellist, to play in the orchestra of a touring opera company. Rio de Janeiro was the scene of the most dramatic of all the incidents in Toscanini's by no means tranquil career. The conductor of the company was a Brazilian, called Leopoldo di Miguez, who was evidently regarded with the utmost contempt by the musicians under him — most of them Italians. Whatever the truth, it is common enough for musicians to make miserable the life of a conductor whom they don't respect, and the unfortunate Miguez was obviously sorely tried. He stuck out the tour, but on the return to Rio promptly resigned and wrote to the papers in his own defense. *Aida* was to be performed that night,

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and at that period was a comparatively unfamiliar work (it was first given in Cairo in 1871 and at the Scala in 1872). The manager was at his wits' end when the audience assembled. They were in no docile mood, and would not let the concertmaster get through the overture (short enough, in all conscience). The distracted impresario appealed to the chorus master, who was booted off his stand before he could lead a note. Finally the members of the orchestra took matters into their own hands. Can it have been that they were entirely innocent regarding the disturbance?

They must have previously been made aware of Toscanini's unusual talents, for they propelled him out of his cellist's desk and on to the conductor's stand. For some reason the crowd, perhaps astounded at the sight of a nineteen-year-old boy in such a position, settled down and let the opera proceed. Eyewitnesses have recorded that one of Toscanini's first quiet gestures was to close the open score before him. The orchestra strove to give their young leader the utmost support, and the performance turned out to be a triumph. From this moment on, Toscanini's career was determined. He continued to conduct the opera in Brazil through a repertoire of eighteen works — an amazing feat when we consider that he had had no notice that he would be required for the post of conductor.

In those days Italy was a place full of opportunity for a conductor. Opera was flourishing, and a young man of not too conventional ideas could ride to fame on the wave of popularity which Wagner's works were rolling up. There used to be a great deal of talk of the hostility to Wagner and the slow grind that his works had to endure before they were received with general favor. But there is more and more evidence to-day that, while his music may have suffered in the discussion of many intellectuals, it did appeal strongly to the public. It is suspected that interpreters benefited as

much as they ventured by the association. At any rate Toscanini, after his return from South America, was instrumental in spreading the Wagnerian gospel.

II

At the outset Toscanini conducted in Turin, though he also visited other Italian cities. During this period of the 1890's we associate him especially with three composers. The first of these was Puccini, whose works were not immediately popular, but who was destined to be the great Italian opera composer of his generation. Toscanini conducted the premieres of most of Puccini's works through the posthumous production of *Turandot* in 1926. Chief among the operas that he successfully launched at this period were *Madame Butterfly*, *Manon Lescaut*, and *La Bohème*. Another work that he introduced and that proved an astonishing success was Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. A less fortunate association, as far as the future success of his works in most of the world is concerned, was with Alfredo Catalani, whose operas, *Edmea*, *Loreley*, and *La Wally*, have been warmly sponsored by Toscanini; it is through no neglect of his that they have not survived.

Toscanini's success in Turin led to his appointment as director of the Scala in Milan in 1898. This famous theatre had had to close down the year previous, but was now reopened under the patronage of the Duke Guido Visconti di Modrone. Toscanini had conducted the orchestral society of Milan and had made such a reputation that at the age of thirty-two he was not thought too young for this important post. This, his first connection with a theatre which was to play a large part in his career, lasted for three seasons. As has been said, he was determined to present much of Wagner, and at the concerts he also offered the symphonies of Brahms and introduced some of the tone poems of Strauss. To all three of these composers he has remained

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unswervingly loyal — and above all to Verdi. In 1901 he took an important part in the ceremonies attending Verdi's death.

The circumstances of Toscanini's departure from the Scala are at once so curious and so indicative of the man's character as to bear relating in some detail. He has always made a point of standing out against the prevalent custom of encores during the performance of an opera, and on one occasion earlier in his career he was nearly lynched for his principles by an angry Sicilian crowd. Only the intervention of the chief of the Mafia, who appeared to have admired the young man's pluck, saved him from a really desperate situation.

A somewhat similar crisis arose at the Scala towards the end of the season of 1903, when Toscanini waited, obdurate and motionless, while the audience clamored for an encore to an aria in Verdi's *Masked Ball*. The noise in the hall would not cease, and Toscanini would not give in. Finally he threw down his baton and rushed from the theatre by the service exit. One biographer reports that he had to put his hand through a glass door in order to escape. Escape he did, however, and at six o'clock the next morning was on his way to Genoa and a boat for Buenos Aires.

Such precipitate behavior must have surprised and annoyed the managers at Milan, for they had to make what shift they could to get a substitute for the remaining operas that year and a successor for the next season. As an act in Toscanini's career it was by no means isolated. Similar incidents had occurred before and were to be repeated in the future. Toscanini has never brooked the slightest interference with what he has considered to be right. He thought encores were artistically wrong, and the fact that the Italian nation liked them made not the slightest difference in his attitude. He has always wanted more rehearsals than some managements have been willing to pay for, and if they are not forth-

coming, he simply downs tools until they are. In most artists such conduct would be considered petulant, but in him it seems to come from a fanatical devotion to his art. What managers say behind his back at one of these scenes is not reported, as a rule, though it is known that his long association with Gatti-Casazza was frequently stormy.

After the flight to Argentina in 1903, Toscanini alternated between conducting the spring season in Buenos Aires and engagements in Rome and Turin and Bologna, and by the season of 1906-1907 he was back in good standing at the Scala. In 1908, Toscanini and Gatti-Casazza signed contracts with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The latter shared the management with Andreas Dippel, and the conductors of this brilliant period of the Metropolitan's history were Mahler, Toscanini, and Hertz. What a privilege to listen to the Wagnerian repertoire with the great singers of the time and under such scrupulous direction as that of Mahler and Toscanini!

Toscanini was responsible for two much-talked-of premieres — Giordano's *Madame Sans-Gêne* from Sardou's play, and Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, based on David Belasco's *Girl of the Golden West*. Neither work has made really important operatic history or has appreciably survived. In the former case Toscanini may have worked interpretative wonders with Giordano's score, which intrinsically may not tempt conductors and managers without the glamour of a première. In the latter case it was probably Puccini's fault, since he made no attempt to write music that was even remotely American in spirit. And Mr. Belasco's hard work with the acting to make it appear natural wore off in subsequent performances. Toscanini stayed with the Metropolitan into the first year of the war and contributed greatly to its success during those splendid seasons. Presumably he could have worked with Gatti-Casazza as long as he pleased; but

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he had a nervous breakdown and sailed abruptly for Italy. Like all his connections with musical organizations, this one was severed quickly and cleanly.

III

During the war Toscanini did a great deal of charity work conducting for benefits. On August 31, 1916, he conducted a military band under fire on the hilltop of Monte Santo, which was stormed by the Italians during the struggle of Isonzo. In 1920 he gave a concert at the occupation of Fiume for Gabriele d'Annunzio.

Yet, with all this patriotic activity, he did not hesitate to conduct German music, even the *Götterdämmerung* funeral march in Rome over strong protest. Moral or physical cowardice is the last weakness of which one can accuse him.

After the war it was proposed to revive the Scala, and Toscanini was the obvious choice to do it. First he took an orchestra — the nucleus of that which he had been leading in Milan at the time — on a rapid tour of the United States, giving in all 124 concerts. On his return he led a performance of Verdi's *Falstaff* for the opening of the new Scala in the day after Christmas, 1921. The season lasted until May and included twelve operas which would do the richest company credit. Among them were *Parsifal*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Boris Godunov*, Boito's *Meistersöfeler*, and Catalani's *La Wally*. In the second season novelties by Pizzetti and Respighi were brought out, and there was a notable revival of Mozart's *Magie Flute*. So the Scala continued in a career amazingly courageous, considering the conventionality of most opera companies. Boito's *Nerone* was completed and produced; the *Ring* was restaged; and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* was revived. Toscanini did the greatest part of the work.

In 1926, Puccini's unfinished opera, *Turandot*, was given its world première at the Scala. It was typical of Tosca-

nini's independence that at the last moment he postponed the performance a day because he was not satisfied with the number of rehearsals. It mattered nothing to him that musicians from all over the world had gathered in anticipation and made their plans, it may be supposed, for the announced date. Toscanini continued as absolute ruler of the Scala until the summer of 1929. He then planned to retire from the strain of opera direction — he was sixty-two — and devote himself to concerts and special performances of opera. He has held to that policy.

His recent career is familiar to Americans. For four seasons he was the mainstay of the New York Philharmonic until his resignation in 1936, and the triumph of that farewell is still ringing in his ears. In spite of his unworldliness and idealism he made a great deal of money in America. It is said that he received \$8000 a concert, free of income tax, and that he now gets \$4000 a concert from the National Broadcasting Company. Indeed the Philharmonic fee set a record which no other conductor — except perhaps Mr. Stokowski — ever equaled. It also set a dangerous and unwise precedent, the effects of which we are now learning to measure.

Probably Mr. Toscanini could not say with Sherlock Holmes: 'My charges are on a fixed scale. I never vary them, save when I remit them altogether.' At any rate he can hardly be paid throughout the world at the New York rate. It was once his ambition to conduct at Bayreuth, and, as a staunch Wagnerian, he had his reward and went there every summer until political considerations made him a voluntary exile from Germany. He has also had his run-ins with the government of his own country. In May 1931, a zealous Fascist struck him for his refusal to lead the Fascist hymn, 'Giovinezza,' at a concert in Bologna.

For several years he has provided the climax of the symphonic season at Lon-

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don and Vienna, and he is the moving spirit at Salzburg, where he erects an artistic barrier against the overfashionable inanity of the public which threatens to spoil that charming town. His recent controversy on morals with Furtwängler is another proof that his word is law in Salzburg. In December 1936 his altruism took him to Palestine, where Bronislaw Huberman has established a Jewish orchestra. Now he is in America with the National Broadcasting Company's new and expensive orchestra, somewhat to the consternation of the supporters of established orchestras. We may well express some doubt as to how this venture will work out. How will Toscanini's temper and his unquenched zeal for artistic perfection jibe with the commercialism and hurly-burly of a radio station's management? Will he find that this season's contract is all that he can endure? Whatever the outcome, he will never do anything cheap and could even be trusted in Hollywood.

IV

Every biographer of Toscanini discommends at length on his remarkable memory. He had this quality as a boy in the conservatory at Parma; and there is no doubt that it is just as extraordinary as the memory of Macaulay or Joseph de Maistre. It has stood him in good stead, for without it he could hardly have succeeded to the same extent as a conductor. He is so nearsighted that he could not read the score at his desk in the concert hall. One of the best of the many anecdotes of his memory is that of a double-bass player who broke an E string during the performance of some opera. He brought this to Toscanini's attention during the intermission and complained that he had no other. Then he waited while the conductor seemed deep in thought; he repeated his question and waited again. Finally Toscanini looked up and said: 'It's all right; I have been

going over the rest of your part and you won't need that string again.'

Another characteristic incident occurred in 1892 when Franchetti's *Cristoforo Colombo* was to have its première in Genoa. It was to be an impressive occasion, and then Luigi Mancinelli, who was to direct, fell ill. Mancinelli was the most renowned conductor in Italy, and the opera was quite unknown. The manager telegraphed to Milan to Toscanini, who asked for a day to consider. He got hold of a score, studied it that night, and conducted the première from memory the next day. There is no need to expatiate on this quality. He has it and puts it to the best possible use. Moreover, he has gone on record as opposing the habit of conducting from memory unless there is a good reason to leave the score behind. To all intents and purposes a conductor has to know his score so well that the question of its presence or absence is unimportant.

Toscanini's temper is famous, and there are many stories about its occasional terrifying outbursts. Tobia Nicotra, in his life of the conductor, relates the following incident: 'During a rehearsal of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Turin some time ago Toscanini suddenly perceived that some of the musicians were making no more than a half-hearted response to his very lively demands. "I can not possibly tolerate indifference in musicians," he exclaimed angrily. "It is your duty, at least, to second my interest." But the negligence continued. One man in particular was inexcusably listless. "I would kill a man for behaving like this!" cried Toscanini, and, leaping down from the rostrum, he flew at the impassive violinist with such impetuosity that his bow snapped and a splinter of wood scraped his forehead.' There was an ugly scene, and Toscanini was summoned before the authorities, but was acquitted.

It must be said that all the stories relate to scenes that were explosive in the interests of the job at hand. They had a

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was done by camp followers. There are camp followers in the arts as well. Mr. Aldous Huxley once advanced the theory that Beethoven was responsible for many of the most objectionable qualities of modern music, both the barbarity of jazz and its sickly-sweet harmonies. He meant, of course, that the change in direction given to the art of music by the strength of Beethoven's personality made possible the kind of weaknesses which afflict a good deal of popular and some serious music since his day. It is one of the prices we have to pay for Beethoven's genius.

I am not aiming here at the notion that Toscanini is responsible for the conductor-star system; but it is still possible to maintain that his unique position has caused some of the more hysterical utterances in connection with conducting and has inoculated the public with an unfortunate obsession. The emphasis is entirely too much on the conductor, too little on the orchestra and the music. And this is what Toscanini in all his statements and by his actions has most wished to prevent.

V

We may search in vain for a parallel to the position of Toscanini. No conductor in the past, neither Richter nor Nikisch, Theodore Thomas nor Gericke, has excited such international esteem. Bruno Walter, excellent musician though he is, cannot hold the reputation of the Salzburg Festival in the hollow of his hand as does Toscanini. It must be granted that there is something quite uncommon in the man's personality that fires the imagination of the crowd. Faithfulness of interpretation alone could not do it, for the public is not interested in such academic points. Toscanini's own faith succeeds in carrying mob and musicians with him. He must have had this quality in almost as full power when only nineteen years old, or why would his fellow musicians have hoisted him to the conductor's stand in Rio de

Janeiro and how could he have carried the day with that angry Latin-American audience?

Toscanini's efforts for the contemporary music of an earlier period, for Strauss, Debussy, and Puccini, are sometimes forgotten when the programmes of his recent Philharmonic period are criticized. He began conducting at so early an age, when propaganda and spade work still had to be done for Wagner and Brahms, that it would have been unreasonable to expect him to keep abreast of post-war developments. His Philharmonic programmes were open to the criticism that they were unadventurous. He repeated over and over the symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms, which naturally delighted his audiences. Meanwhile the Philharmonic's other conductors had the harder task of introducing new music, for Toscanini made few and insignificant efforts in that direction; and of course they suffered by comparison in reaping applause. The critics felt obliged to write long notices of Toscanini's triumphs and, faced with the repetition of familiar music, rushed into a competition of superlatives. The press has a heavy share of the blame in fastening the star conductor in the public consciousness.

It was not a very gratifying prospect that the Philharmonic confronted when Toscanini's half of the season dragged the other half with it and kept the subscribers in line for the whole season. No doubt it was proof of his ultimate wisdom that he finally did retire from a position that was invidious for other conductors and bad for the morale of the men in the orchestra (who, it was said, were less willing to coöperate with other conductors), and that pampered the public (who were less willing to hear what the other conductors had to offer). It would be something to hear this side of the story candidly presented by Messrs. Furtwängler, Mengelberg, and Walter. Now, of course, the press began to eat its words. There was talk of a balanced

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season, of the virtues of one conductor in charge of the orchestra's entire season, of comparisons favorable to the policies pursued by the Boston and Chicago Symphony Orchestras. Nevertheless the authorities of the Philharmonic continued to place their confidence in the box-office value of the star system. The very season after Toscanini's retirement seven conductors were produced for the edification of the public, and only recently has there been a real effort made towards retrenchment.

This brief summary of the Philharmonic's recent history is the best possible indictment of the star system, though it does imply that you must have, at any rate, one star. Music, far more than the theatre and the screen, has a very definite and important element of education in its relations with the public. A wise conductor, even if he meets with opposition, cannot in the long run afford to let his audiences have everything their own way, or else their taste runs to seed. The seasonal repetition of the masterpieces of symphonic music can easily reach a saturation point. At any rate it is only logical to suppose so; and it is perfectly evident that a subscription public built up over many years can get lazy in its habits if it is not provided with the new and unfamiliar to sharpen its senses.

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