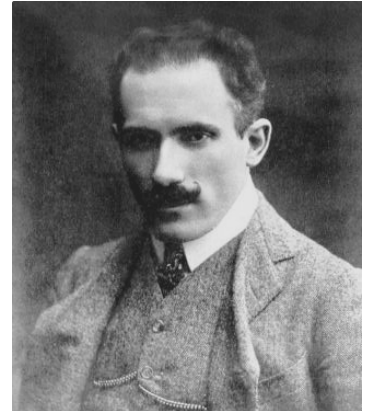


ALLA CORRENTE

Arturo Toscanini

Arturo Toscanini (born March 25, 1867, in Parma, Emilia-Romagna, Italy; died January 16, 1957 in the Bronx, New York City, New York)

Arturo Toscanini was an Italian conductor; as such he was one of the most acclaimed musicians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was renowned for his brilliant intensity, his restless perfectionism, his phenomenal ear for orchestral detail and sonority, and his photographic memory. As music director of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, he became a household name through his radio and television broadcasts and many recordings of the operatic and symphonic repertoire. He is widely considered to have been one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century.



Toscanini won a scholarship to the local music conservatory in Parma, where he studied the cello. He joined the orchestra of an opera company, with which he toured South America in 1886. While presenting *Aida* in Rio de Janeiro, Leopoldo Miguez, the locally hired conductor, reached the summit of a two-month escalating conflict with the performers due to his rather poor command of the work; the singers were so disgusted that they went on strike and forced the company's impresario to seek a substitute conductor. But on the evening of June 30, 1886, the new maestro Carlo Superti found himself booed by the audience under the prompting of the disgruntled Miguez. Yet another last-minute substitute conductor, Aristide Venturi, could not overcome a hostile, boisterous public, and was forced to leave the podium. In desperation, the singers suggested the name of their assistant Chorus Master, who knew the whole opera by heart. Although he had no conducting experience, Toscanini was forcibly persuaded by the musicians to take up the baton at 9:15 P.M., discarded the score, and led a sensational performance of the two-and-a-half hour opera completely from memory. The public was taken by surprise, at first by the youth and sheer aplomb of this unknown conductor, then by his solid mastery. The result was astounding acclaim. For the rest of that season Toscanini conducted eighteen operas, all with absolute success. Thus began his career as a conductor, at age 19.

Upon returning to Italy, Toscanini set out on a dual career path. He continued to conduct and made his first appearance in Italy at the Teatro Carignano in Turin, on November 4, 1886, in the world premiere of the revised version of Alfredo Catalani's *Edmea* (it had had its premiere in its original form at La Scala on February 27th of that year). This was the beginning of Toscanini's life-long friendship and championing of Catalani; he even named his first daughter Wally after the heroine of Catalani's opera *La Wally*. However, he also returned to his chair in the cello section, and participated as cellist in the world premiere of Verdi's *Otello* (at La Scala in 1887) under the composer's supervision. Verdi, who habitually complained that conductors never seemed interested in directing his scores the way he had written them, was impressed by reports from Arrigo Boito about Toscanini's ability to interpret his scores. The composer was also impressed when Toscanini consulted him personally about the *Te Deum*, suggesting an *allargando* where it was not set out in the score. Verdi said that he had left it out for fear that "certain interpreters would have exaggerated the marking." Gradually the young musician's reputation as an operatic conductor of unusual authority and skill supplanted his cello career. In the following decade he consolidated his career in Italy, entrusted with the world premieres of Puccini's *La Bohème* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. In 1896, Toscanini conducted his first symphonic concert (in Turin, with works by Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner). He exhibited a considerable capacity for hard work: in 1898 he conducted 43 concerts in Turin. By 1898 he was also resident conductor at La Scala, and he remained there until 1908, returning during the 1920's. He took the La Scala Orchestra to

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the US on a concert tour in 1920-1921, and it was during that tour that he made his first recordings (for Victor Talking Machine Company).

Outside of Europe, Toscanini conducted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (1908-1915) as well as the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (1926-1936). He toured Europe with the New York Philharmonic in 1930; he and the musicians were acclaimed by critics and audiences wherever they went. Toscanini was the first non-German conductor to appear at Bayreuth (1930-1931), and the New York Philharmonic was the first non-German orchestra to play there. In the 1930's he conducted at the Salzburg Festival (1934-1937) and the inaugural concert in 1936 of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra in what later became Tel Aviv, and later performed with them in Jerusalem, Haifa, Cairo and Alexandria.

In 1919, Toscanini ran unsuccessfully as a fascist parliamentary candidate in Milan. He had been called “the greatest conductor in the world” by fascist leader Benito Mussolini. However, he became disillusioned with fascism and repeatedly defied the Italian dictator after Mussolini's ascent to power in 1922. He refused to display Mussolini's photograph or conduct the fascist anthem *Giovinetta* at La Scala. He raged to a friend, “If I were capable of killing a man, I would kill Mussolini.”

At a memorial concert for Italian composer Giuseppe Martucci on May 14, 1931 at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, he was ordered to begin by playing *Giovinetta* but he refused even though the fascist foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano was present in the audience. Afterwards he was, in his own words, “attacked, injured and repeatedly hit in the face” by a group of Blackshirts. Mussolini, incensed by the conductor's refusal, had his phone tapped, placed him under constant surveillance and took away his passport. The passport was returned only after world outcry over Toscanini's treatment. He left Italy until 1946, when he returned to conduct a concert at the restored La Scala Opera House, which had been bombed during World War II.

Fleeing Italy, Toscanini returned to the United States where the NBC Symphony Orchestra was created for him in 1937. He conducted his first NBC broadcast concert on December 25, 1937, in NBC Studio 8-H in New York City's Rockefeller Center. The acoustics of the specially built studio were very dry; some remodeling in 1939 added a bit more reverberation. (In 1950, the studio was further remodeled for television productions; today it is used by NBC for Saturday Night Live. In 1980, it was used by Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic in a series of special televised NBC concerts called *Live From Studio 8H*, the first one being a tribute to Toscanini, punctuated by clips from his television concerts.)

Toscanini was often criticized for neglecting American music; however, on November 5, 1938, he conducted the world premieres of two orchestral works by Samuel Barber, *Adagio for Strings* and *Essay for Orchestra*. In 1945, he led the orchestra in recording sessions of the *Grand Canyon Suite* by Ferde Grofé in Carnegie Hall (supervised by Grofé) and *An American in Paris* by George Gershwin in NBC's Studio 8-H. He also conducted broadcast performances of Copland's *El Salon Mexico*; Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with soloists Earl Wild and Benny Goodman and *Piano Concerto in F* with pianist Oscar Levant; and music by other American composers, including marches of John Philip Sousa. He even wrote his own orchestral arrangement of *The Star Spangled Banner*, which was incorporated into the NBC Symphony Orchestra's performances of Verdi's *Hymn of the Nations*. (Earlier, while music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, he conducted music by Abram Chasins, Bernard Wagenaar, and Howard Hanson.)

In 1940, Toscanini took the orchestra on a “goodwill” tour of South America. Later that year, he had a dis-

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agreement with NBC management over their use of his musicians in other NBC broadcasts. This, among other reasons, resulted in a letter which Toscanini wrote on March 10, 1941 to RCA's David Sarnoff. He stated that he now wished "to withdraw from the militant scene of Art" and thus declined to sign a new contract for the upcoming winter season, but left the door open for an eventual return "if my state of mind, health and rest will be improved enough." So Leopold Stokowski was engaged on a three-year contract as replacement and served as the NBC Symphony Orchestra's music director from 1941 to 1944. Toscanini's state of mind soon underwent a change and he returned as Stokowski's co-conductor for the latter's second and third seasons resuming full control in 1944.

One of the more remarkable broadcasts was in July 1942, when Arturo Toscanini conducted the American premiere of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7*. Due to World War II, the score was microfilmed in the USSR and brought by courier to the United States. Stokowski had previously given the US premieres of Shostakovich's 1st, 3rd and 6th Symphonies in Philadelphia, and in December 1941 urged NBC to obtain the score of the 7th as he wanted to conduct its premiere as well. But Toscanini coveted this for himself and there were a number of remarkable letters between the two conductors before Stokowski agreed to let Toscanini have the privilege of conducting the first performance. Unfortunately for New York listeners, a major thunderstorm virtually obliterated the NBC radio signals there, but the performance was heard elsewhere and preserved on transcription discs. It was later issued by RCA Victor in the 1967 centennial boxed set tribute to Toscanini, which included a number of NBC broadcasts never released on discs. Shostakovich himself expressed a dislike for the performance, after he heard a recording of the broadcast. In Toscanini's later years he also expressed dislike for the work and amazement that he had actually conducted it.

The NBC concerts continued in Studio 8-H until the fall of 1950. They were then held in Carnegie Hall, where many of the orchestra's recording sessions had been held, due to the dry acoustics of Studio 8-H. The final broadcast performance, an all-Wagner program, took place on April 4, 1954, in Carnegie Hall. During this concert Toscanini suffered a memory lapse reportedly caused by a transient ischemic attack, although some have attributed the lapse to his having been secretly informed that NBC intended to end the broadcasts and disband the NBC Symphony Orchestra. He never conducted live in public again. That June, he participated in his final recording sessions, remaking portions of two Verdi operas so they could be commercially released. Toscanini was 87 years old when he retired. After his retirement, the NBC Symphony Orchestra was reorganized as the Symphony of the Air, making regular performances and recordings, until it was disbanded in 1963.

On radio, he conducted seven complete operas, including *La Bohème* and *Otello*, all of which were eventually released on records and CD, thus enabling the modern listening public to have at least some idea of what an opera conducted by Toscanini sounded like.

With the help of his son Walter, Toscanini spent his remaining years editing tapes and transcriptions of his performances with the NBC Symphony. The "approved" recordings were issued by RCA Victor, which also issued his recordings with the La Scala Orchestra, New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and Philadelphia Orchestra. His recordings with the BBC Symphony Orchestra (1937-1939) and Philharmonia Orchestra (1952) were issued by EMI. Various companies have issued recordings on compact discs of a number of broadcasts and concerts that he did not officially approve. Among these are stereophonic recordings of his last two NBC

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broadcast concerts.

Toscanini died at age 89 of a stroke at his home in the Riverdale section of the Bronx in New York City on January 16, 1957. His body was returned to Italy and was interred in the *Cimitero Monumentale* in Milan. His epitaph is taken from one account of his remarks concluding the 1926 premiere of Puccini's unfinished *Turandot*: "*Qui finisce l'opera, perché a questo punto il maestro è morto*" ("Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died [lit. 'is dead']"). During his funeral service, Leyla Gencer sang a part from Verdi's *Requiem*. In his will, he left his baton to his protégée Herva Nelli. Toscanini was posthumously awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1987.

Family

Toscanini married Carla De Martini on June 21, 1897, when she was not yet 20 years old. Their first child, Walter, was born on March 19, 1898. A daughter, Wally, was born on January 16, 1900. Carla gave birth to another boy, Giorgio, in September 1901, but he died of diphtheria on June 10, 1906. Then, that same year, Carla gave birth to their second daughter, Wanda.

Innovations & Premieres

At La Scala, which had what was then the most modern stage lighting system installed in 1901 and an orchestral pit installed in 1907, Toscanini pushed through reforms in the performance of opera. He insisted on dimming the house-lights during performances. As his biographer Harvey Sachs wrote: "He believed that a performance could not be artistically successful unless unity of intention was first established among all the components: singers, orchestra, chorus, staging, sets, and costumes." Toscanini favored the traditional orchestral seating plan with the first violins and cellos on the left, the violas on the near right, and the second violins on the far right.

Toscanini conducted the world premieres of many operas, four of which have become part of the standard operatic repertoire: *Pagliacci*, *La Bohème*, *La Fanciulla del West* and *Turandot*; he took an active role in Alfano's completion of Puccini's *Turandot*. He also conducted the first Italian performances of *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Salome*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Euryanthe* as well as the South American premieres of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Madama Butterfly* and the North American premiere of *Boris Godunov*.

-Dr. James J. Boitano
(Adapted from bachcantatas.com)