

# Arturo Toscanini: Remembering the Maestro: Music Master, Anti-Fascist

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The term maestro means a “master” or “teacher” in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. In English it refers to a distinguished musician or noted figure in any artistic field. Most often, however, it’s a term of respect for an eminent conductor of classical music. For this writer, the term applies to one great man above all others, and this year commemorates the 50th anniversary of his death – the incomparable Arturo Toscanini whose anti-fascism enhanced his musical prominence and is the reason for this article.

Here’s what former New York Times music critic Olin Downes once wrote about him: “Toscanini (had) unparalleled qualities as an interpreter. (His performances showed) profound intuition, abnormal concentration (and) consuming sincerity which make them what they are, and without a precise equivalent in any other conductor of which we know....People marvel at such physical as well as artistic capacity. Toscanini is a physical and mental phenomenon....(The) supreme....spirit of the sovereign artist....sustains him....Watch him as he walks slowly to the podium and mounts the stand. Then see what happens the instant he faces the orchestra, scoreless....taking command immediately with imperious authority and elan. A rock-ribbed steadfastness of tempo emanates from the baton....as the music ebbs and flows from this extraordinary blend of control and release.....Toscanini (is) like the invincible titan and warrior of the faith. (He’s) the great master, the ageless hero....the incorruptible and consummate artist (creating) art (that is) greater than man himself....And it is this....which makes his fellow-man his debtor.”

The Maestro was born in Parma, Italy March 25, 1867. He began his musical career as a cellist and debuted at age 19 as a conductor in Rio de Janeiro in 1886 when he was unexpectedly called on to substitute for the regular music director. Amazingly, he led the orchestra and cast in Verdi’s classic Aida from memory without ever before having done it. It changed his life and the operatic and symphonic world.

Toscanini was considered by many critics and fellow musicians the greatest conductor of his era, or any other, that lasted nearly seven decades from 1886 to his retirement in 1954 at age 86. His perfectionism was demanding and extraordinary and was aided by his phenomenal memory. He conducted all his concerts without scores, remembering every nuance of every note of every performance until once late in his life his memory faltered on April 4, 1954 at age 86. In mid-performance, he stopped conducting live on-air. He covered his eyes and the orchestra, so dependent on his leadership, at first fell silent. With help, he managed to finish the concert with the well-rehearsed orchestra leading their Maestro who led them for so many years. Before the concert’s end, Toscanini dropped his baton and left the stage. He never conducted in public again.

Toscanini's musical genius had an enormously enriching influence on many, including this writer. It began a lifelong love for the classics that remains to this day and is still enjoyed in a large collection of old but very serviceable LP recordings of his operas and symphonic works.

The first ever bought is still the one most cherished – his classic 1946 recording of Puccini's *La Boheme* with a distinguished cast. It was performed live to a worldwide audience on NBC Radio on two successive Sundays beginning 50 years and two days after he premiered it in the Regio Opera House in Turin, Italy for his friend and composer Giacomo Puccini. In the recorded performance, as in some others, Toscanini can be heard humming at several dramatic moments and at one stunning point sighing in an expression of deep emotion. Some critics said it detracted from the performance. Others, and this writer, felt it enriched the listening experience, making it special by glorifying and highlighting it. It made a lasting impact on listeners still remaining for this one over 60 years later.

Toscanini was more than a great music master. He was also uncompromisingly anti-fascist at a time of Mussolini's rise to power in his native Italy in the 1920s followed by Hitler in 1930s Germany. Though non-political overall, throughout that period and during WW II, he was distinguished for his views as a symbol of freedom and humanity when so little of it existed at a time of global war on three continents. More on that below.

Throughout the late 19th century, Toscanini slowly built his reputation conducting in various concert halls throughout Italy. He directed the premiere performances of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* in 1892 and *La Boheme* in 1896. He also directed the Italian premieres of Wagner's *Gotterdammerung* in 1895 and *Siegfried* in 1899 at the famed La Scala opera house that first began operating two years after the United States declared its independence from the British Crown. During his illustrious career, he conducted throughout Europe, North and South America and became the principal conductor of the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1908, remaining there until 1915. In 1926, he debuted with the New York Philharmonic, became its co-conductor in 1927 and its principal music director in 1929.

While on tour in Bologna, Italy in 1931, he was assaulted by fascist thugs for his views, authorities temporarily confiscated his passport, and the Fascist party surrounded his Milan home with carabinieri. During the same period, he was constantly attacked by the Fascist press for his uncompromising views. As a result, Toscanini refused thereafter to conduct in Italy during Mussolini's reign.

In 1933, he withdrew from Bayreuth after Hitler became German Chancellor in January that year. He even sent Hitler a personal telegram stating his views to which the German dictator responded by banning further sale or performance of his recordings. That same year his daughter, Wanda, married famed concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz who performed on-stage and in recordings many times with his renowned father-in-law. In the 1930s, Toscanini resigned from the New York Philharmonic to lead the Vienna Philharmonic, later withdrawing from the Salzburg Festival in 1938 protesting Hitler's Anschluss takeover of Austria in March that year.

Beginning with his first concert on Christmas Day, 1937, he began his association with the NBC Symphony, many of whose recordings this writer has and treasures as classics. Company president David Sarnoff created the orchestra expressly for the Maestro as an inducement for him to return to New York. He did and remained the orchestra's conductor

until his retirement in 1954.

Many critics and classical musicians regard the 1937 - 1954 17 year era as the golden age of symphonic music in America when Arturo Toscanini led the NBC Symphony throughout the period. His weekly concerts were held in NBC's famed Studio 8-H in New York's Rockefeller Center until the fall of 1950 when they were moved to Carnegie Hall for its superior acoustics.

A personal note: Live Sunday evening concerts were broadcast worldwide on NBC Radio, including 10 televised in the US from 1948 - 1952. They were held around the dinner hour in the 1940s and early 1950s. My mother introduced me to them. She played classical piano, listened when able, as did I as a young boy. It began a lifetime love for the classics and the Maestro's incomparable performances that touched everyone hearing them. Toscanini's uncompromising standards of excellence and relentless quest for perfection had a profound effect on his listeners. I'm one of them any time I choose from my large collection of his recordings. They preserve his music forever that's as powerful and moving now as when first performed.

One other personal note: My mother's love of great music was matched by her passion for learning. She pursued it and received her well-deserved degree along with her son in the same class of 1956, seven months before Toscanini's death. It was the first time a mother and son ever graduated together in the 320 year history of the oldest higher institution of learning in the country. June 14, 1956 was her day. Her son just went along for the ride.

### **Toscanini the Anti-Fascist**

As a conductor and anti-fascist, Toscanini was uncompromising. This section covers the political philosophy of a non-political man who was fiercely democratic. It emerged when the Maestro publicly denounced Benito Mussolini after he led his National Fascist Party's march on Rome in October, 1922 declaring himself Il Duce or supreme leader. Toscanini thereafter refused to play the Fascist anthem Giovanezza he didn't consider fit music and wanted nothing to do with the Fascist dictator.

When Italian King Emmanuel III declared himself Emperor of conquered Ethiopia in 1936, Toscanini wrote: "Cursed Rome. Mussolini, the Emperor-King, and the Pope. Pigs, all of them." In a letter to Berlin in 1941, he wrote: "You are too poisoned by the atmosphere that surrounds you, you are all living now too much amid shame and dishonor, without showing any sign of rebellion, to be able to value people like me, who have remained and will remain above the mud, not to give it a worse name, that is drowning the Italians."

Earlier in 1938, he wrote: "I've never been and will never be involved in politics; that is, I became involved only once in '19, and for Mussolini and I repented....I've never taken part in Societies, either political or artistic....I've always believed only an individual can be a gentleman....Everyone ought to express his own opinion honestly and courageously, then dictators, criminals, wouldn't last so long."

In February, 1941 Toscanini intervened on behalf of fellow Italian and anti-fascist, Claudio Alcorso. He'd been arrested because of his nationality in allied Australia in July, 1940 and held for what became a bitter three and a half year confinement. It was because Australia judged Italians during the war the way the US viewed Japanese Americans. It made Alcorso believe "a dogmatic mentality was not the sole prerogative of German and Italian Fascists."

Toscanini's efforts failed despite repeated efforts, though Alcorso was finally freed after Mussolini and his Fascist party fell in 1943.

While Mussolini ruled as Italy's dictator, the Maestro refused to perform in his native country including at the famed Milan La Scala opera house. He publicly stated: "Never! I refuse to turn La Scala into a market place for Fascist demonstrations. They have the square outside and also the Galleria nearby for that, but while I conduct the Scala orchestra, it will remain the home of opera and never will it become a propaganda platform." Mussolini gave his brazen response: "Never will my feet cross the threshold of La Scala until Toscanini, the anti-Fascist, goes from there. How dare he refuse to play Giovanezza (the Fascist anthem)?"

Toscanini condemned Mussolini for his comments telling La Scala's directors: "I will conduct Giovanezza never and for nobody!" He stood resolute by his word. He deplored dictatorships and never played in Czarist or Stalinist Russia as well. He was an implacable enemy of tyranny. In Weimar pre-Hitler Germany, he was the first non-German to appear at the Wagner Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, but refused to return in 1933 after Hitler came to power. He denounced the Nazi's treatment of Jewish musicians in protest. He also refused to conduct at Austria's Salzburg Festival because noted Jewish conductor Bruno Walter's performances there weren't broadcast in Germany. Later in 1938 and 1939, he conducted, without compensation, at a Lucerne, Switzerland festival with an orchestra entirely composed of musicians who'd fled German persecution.

During WW II, Toscanini said: "Italy will certainly have a revolution as a result of the current war; the Allies will either favor and help it, or hinder it. The Allies' attitude will determine whether the revolution will, or will not, result in an orderly democratic government...." If he were still living, Toscanini would be outspoken about today's world and the ugliness Washington injects in it. He'd denounce fascism's rise in America and the power of wealth and privilege driving it. He was a democrat and patriot whose influential views had weight.

Today the Mastro would be in the artistic forefront leading the struggle for the same freedoms he believed in when fascism earlier engulfed Europe, Asia and North Africa in its greatest of all wars. In words and stunning music, he'd be in the lead to prevent it happening again so the spirit of equity, social justice and peace on earth could prevail for all above the darkness of tyranny now threatening everyone in the age of George Bush's America.

Toscanini conducted his last concert on April 4, 1954 as mentioned above. Always one to surprise (as he did two and a half months earlier choosing *Un Ballo in maschera* over *Rigoletto* for his final opera performance), he eschewed his native Italy and chose an all-Wagner program for the occasion. He died of a stroke at age 89 on January 16, 1957. His extraordinary music and democratic spirit are sorely missed but not forgotten.

Throughout the year, many Toscanini commemorative concerts and events were and are still being held in the US, his native Italy and elsewhere. Most notable was the New York Public Library's showcase exhibition of rare Library material on the Maestro's legacy that ran from February 21 through May 25, 2007. It was called *Arturo Toscanini: Homage to the Maestro*. It included rare rehearsal and performance recordings and unique documents on Toscanini's multifaceted persona. Among items on exhibit were photographs, annotated scores, letters, and many seldom ever seen unpublished materials donated by the Toscanini family to the Library's Music Division. Through these and other documents, the Maestro's memory, spirit and music remains alive.

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