

## 43 Toscanini's Memory

George R. Marek

*All professional musicians have to know a great deal of music, but sometimes their knowledge is simply astonishing. It is difficult for a nonmusician to evaluate such achievements properly, but it is easy to be impressed by them. Toscanini strikes me as someone special; that is why he appears here in the company of S and VP instead of with the other performers in Part V. Nevertheless, as the author himself points out, there have surely been many other musicians with equally impressive memories.*

*determine past days of the week. One of those methods, especially relevant here, relies strictly on memory. If the date occurred during his own lifetime, he just remembers what day of the week it was. He also claims to remember what the weather was like every day for the past thirty years or so.*

*The Reverend Dr. Phelps, described in this brief*

Of course his memory helped him, and there are no end of instances which attest to its retentiveness.<sup>1</sup> The most famous of these anecdotes has been told in various versions. I believe the one reported by the violinist Augusto Rossi to be correct: it was in St. Louis, just before the start of the concert, that the second bassoonist, Umberto Ventura, came to Toscanini. He was in great agitation. He had just discovered that the key for the lowest note on his instrument was broken; he couldn't use it. What was to be done? Toscanini, shading his eyes, thought for a moment and then said, "It is all right—that note does not occur in tonight's concert."

<sup>1</sup>It has been estimated that he knew by heart every note of every instrument of about 250 symphonic works and the words and music of about 100 operas, besides a quantity of chamber music, piano music, cello and violin pieces, and songs.

From G. R. Marek, *Toscanini*. London: Vision Press, 1975. Reprinted by permission. L. Phelps, *Memory*. New York: Dutton, 1929.

He thought he would like to have the strings of the NBC play the slow movement of Joachim Raff's Quartet No. 5. The libraries and music stores of New York were searched for a score of the Quartet. None could be found, the piece having fallen out of favor. Toscanini, who had probably not seen the music for decades, let alone played it, wrote the entire movement down, with all the dynamic marks. Much later Bachmann, a collector of musical curiosities, found a copy. They checked it against the Toscanini manuscript: Toscanini had made exactly one error. (Told by Howard Taubman.)

The same Bachmann remembered that once they were playing a game, with Steinberg present. Toscanini said, "Play any excerpt from any of the standard operas or symphonies. Stop when I tell you to stop, but don't take your hands off the piano." Steinberg played. After a few bars Toscanini said, "Stop . . . That is from *Siegfried* Act III, Scene I, bars so and so. The note played by the fifth finger of your left hand is for the bassoon, the second finger clarinet and oboe—" and so on, going through the entire scoring.

I was reading a biography of Rossini and learned that he had composed two endings for his *Otello*, one tragic as in Shakespeare, the other a "happy end," where Othello and Desdemona are reconciled and sing a duet. Rossini's *Otello* is, and surely was at the time, an almost forgotten opera. I happened to mention the curious double ending to Toscanini that night at dinner. He said, "Of course." And he went to the piano and played *both* endings.

In Vienna once Toscanini, in a friendly challenge, wrote out from memory the part the second bassoon plays in the second act of *Die Meistersinger*. He wrote it faultlessly.

Retention of minutiae is an attribute of the interpretive artist; it lies at the base of performance, and it can be trained. Toscanini's astonishing feats were not unique. Bülow's memory was equally precise: he conducted the first performance of *Tristan* entirely without the score and on his first American tour he played 139 concerts without the music on the piano, this at a time when playing from memory had not as yet become the custom. Otto Jahn in his biography of Mozart tells an anecdote now become standard history: Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere* was considered the exclusive property of the Vatican Choir and was so highly prized that no one was allowed to copy it, "on pain of excommunication." Mozart heard it once, went home, wrote the whole thing down from memory, went back, heard it a second time, made a few corrections scribbling secretly in his hat, and performed it later at a gathering at which the papal singer Christofori was present, who confirmed the absolute correctness of Mozart's "theft." (The incident worried Mozart's mother and sister; they thought he had committed a great sin. Wolfgang and Leopold laughed.)