43 Toscanini's Memory

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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.

Of course his memory helped him, and there are no end of instances which attest to its retentiveness. 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."

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.)

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.

Obviously the ability to remember is no guarantee of performing excellence. The Oxford Companion to Music gives the record of a

Mr. Napoleon Bird, barber of Stockport, Cheshire, who in 1894 won the World's Record for what has been called "Pianofortitude" by publicly playing for forty-four hours without repeating a composition; from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. he played dance music for hundreds of couples, and, during the subsequent forty hours, whenever any vocalist or instrumentalist appeared and asked to be accompanied, the mere statement of the title of the piece and the key required were sufficient.

Phenomenal though Toscanini's memory was, he did not rely on it. He conducted no concert without once again, for the seventieth time, taking the scores of the program and reading through them as carefully as if he were examining them for the first time. He often did this in bed, the night before. At every rehearsal the score was there, just in case he wanted to confirm a point or refer to a letter or number, printed in the score for the convenience of conductor and orchestra. He did not bother to learn these by heart. (Mitropoulos did.)

His memory was strengthened by what I may call the "mind's ear," meaning the ability to hear a composition by reading it. That ability is essential to a conductor, but Toscanini possessed it to an amazing degree. He had but to glance at a page of complex music, his glance seemingly casual, and he heard the page both horizontally and vertically in his imagination. He appeared to be riffling through a new score at top speed and one, two, three could decide whether he liked it and what were its weaknesses. To put it differently, his eyes translated into sound as quickly as those expert translators at the United Nations transpose from one language to another.

There was nothing wrong with what is usually called the sense of hearing. He could hear the slightest false intonation amidst an orchestral turmoil. He could hear subtle differences in the quality of sound, produced by some hidden supporting instrument. Josef Gingold, one of the violinists in the NBC Symphony, recalled:

There was a contemporary piece—I can't remember what—that he programmed, tried once, and took off: he couldn't take it; it was too dissonant for him. He came to that rehearsal knowing the piece by memory; and as we were reading it we came to a terrific discord: it was so dissonant that we actually had to look at the fingerboard to see where our notes were. And he stopped: "Eh, terzo corno! Third horn! Re! I didn't hear!" The man had had a few bars' rest and had cleaned his horn, and hadn't been able to get it up again in time to come in. Toscanini couldn't see that far, and didn't see that the man wasn't playing, but he heard that the D was missing (B. H. Haggin, The Toscanini Musicians Knew).

He could hear the minutest shading not only in what was being played but how it sounded. He would have the orchestra play a chord, stop, think, then tell them to adjust it—a touch more of the first trombone, a shade less of the clarinet—play it again, and it would emerge in clear eloquence and so solidly constructed, so truly a chord, that one could not drive the blade of a knife between the notes.

Gregor Piatigorsky told me of the time when he began to work on Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Cello Concerto. They rehearsed first at the Hotel Astor, where Toscanini then lived. Piatigorsky sat at the far end of the room, Toscanini sat at the piano. The next day they repeated the rehearsal. At a certain passage Toscanini said, "That is better—to use the third finger is better." Piatigorsky was dumbfounded: how could Toscanini possibly know that he had changed the fingering? It was certain he could not see it. Piatigorsky asked, "How do you know I changed the fingering from yesterday?" "I heard it," answered Toscanini.