

Arbiter 138: Bruno Walter and Bronislaw Huberman

Bruno Walter's first American concert tours came about during his mature years, after age fifty, when a long engagement as Generalmusikdirektor in Munich made him one of the most celebrated musicians in the world. The first voyage to the United States took place in early 1923, a distressing period for all Germans due to the rampant inflation which caused prices of each basic necessity to rise every day. After 1923, Walter's American tours occurred somewhat regularly for more than fifteen years, up until the late 1930s. This period of trips to the United States may be subdivided in two parts: the turning point is represented by the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, with the consequent exile of Walter and his family from Nazi Germany. Until 1933, Walter had to accommodate his own Trans-Atlantic crossings within the permanent positions he held in his country, first with the Berlin-Charlottenburg Municipal Opera (Städtische Oper) and with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, an uneasy situation considering the inadequate salaries which both positions provided. In order to avoid creating difficulties for these institutions, Walter allotted his own performances in the States to the winter seasons, thus remaining far away from home during the holidays. After 1933, when leaving his Berlin residence on Kaiserdamm, he returned to live in Vienna and had a few free seasons during which his American engagements increased. With his nomination as artistic director of the Wiener Staatsoper by Austrian chancellor Schuschnigg, along side superintendent Erwin Kerber, Walter opted to postpone engagements across the Atlantic for several years due to the importance of his new position. As for the Vienna Opera, which he had sought since the time he had been Gustav Mahler's assistant, his directorship unfortunately did not last long. With the Anschluss, Austria's annexation in the spring of 1938 by the Third Reich, Walter, a Jew, now lost Austria and after a few months of peregrination, went with his family to settle in a villa at Sorengo, a quiet town in the Canton of Ticino along the hills behind Lugano.

The recording of Beethoven's First Symphony heard on this CD, dated March 25, 1939, belongs to this musician's brief Swiss residency, a period which proved rather difficult, given that he was definitely excluded access to all the German and Austrian orchestras and theaters he had worked in since his youth. After the Anschluss, he struggled with the errant life of a guest conductor, especially as engagements throughout Northern Europe (Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia) forced him to endure interminable train trips in order to circumvent Germany's borders. One Balkan tour (Zagreb, Sofia, Athens) in October 1938 had an adventurous conclusion: the Italian airliner bringing him to Italy from Athens was struck by lightning and made a forced landing in the Peloponnesus. After spending Christmas with his family in Sorengo, Walter departed at the start of the year for a new series of tours. He led the Société Philharmonique of Paris in concerts throughout France and in the Vaud, directed the London Philharmonic and BBC Symphony Orchestra in London, and in February took part of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw's season. Seen off by Dutch friends, he embarked for the United States with his wife and eldest daughter Lotte.

The NBC Symphony Orchestra, founded by David Sarnoff and his representative Samuel Chotzinoff, awaited Walter's arrival for a prestigious engagement - five consecutive Saturday Night Concerts taking place between March and April 1939. These five concerts, Walter's first with the NBC, were arranged by his friend Arturo Toscanini, head of this New York radio orchestra. Toscanini and Walter had known each other for some time, having worked together for three consecutive summers (1935-1937) at the Salzburg festival. Abandoning this event due to the advent of the Hitlerites, the two became protagonists at a newly created summer music festival held in Lucerne, the Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern. For Toscanini it was a natural reciprocation for the invitation he received to the Salzburg Festival, which came from Walter: Toscanini now offered his friend a series of appearances with the NBC orchestra, which entered its second season of activity in 1938-39.

As they were intended to promote classical music to an immense public of radio listeners, the NBC's concerts usually consisted of pieces from the standard repertoire. None of the concerts given by Bruno Walter during his debut in any way represented a typical offering. On the contrary, this guest artist wished to indicate the amplex of his own musical interests with programs which traversed centuries of musical history. The first concert, Saturday, March 11th, was dedicated entirely to Mozart (Divertimento in B flat, K. 287, Piano Concerto in D minor, K. 466 with Walter as soloist, conducting from the piano, Symphony no. 40 in G minor, K. 550). The second Saturday, March 18th, offered Weber's Oberon Overture, the Haydn G major 92nd Symphony (Oxford) and Brahms' First Symphony, Op. 68. The third Saturday, March 25, had Arcangelo Corelli's Christmas Concerto, Beethoven's First Symphony [heard on this CD] and contemporary composers such as Richard Strauss, whose symphonic poem *Tod und Verklärung* was programmed, along with the American Daniel Gregory Mason's Suite after English Folk Songs. The fourth concert (April 1st), also bore a monographic character, dedicated entirely to Berlioz (*Le Corsaire* Overture, 3 excerpts from *Damnation de Faust*, *Symphonie Fantastique*, the latter on Arbiter CD 133). The fifth and final program came on April 8th, commencing with two scores of Wagner's, *Eine Faust Overture* and *Siegfried Idyll*, and in the second part, Mahler's First Symphony in D, the Titan.

Walter's appearances were appreciated by the public in the concert hall (and presumably by the immense radio audience) as well as among the critics: Olin Downes, a fervent partisan for Toscanini, never failed to offer his own appreciation, especially for the Mozart which this illustrious guest was celebrated for. At the conclusion of his tour, Walter embarked with Elsa and Lotte on April 15th for London, and in May he was reunited with his younger daughter Gretel in Paris. This would be the final serene period for the family, spending their traditional July vacation in the Engadine. In August, Walter met with Toscanini, as the year before, on Lake of the Four Cantons to lead the second annual Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern. On the 16th, the entire Walter family was present at the Jesuitenkirche for a performance of Verdi's Requiem directed by the "Maestrissimo." That same day, Gretel resolved to ask for a divorce from her husband Robert Neppach, a German film producer, to be united with the Italian singer Ezio Pinza, with whom she was involved with for some time. On the Friday afternoon of August 18th as her father rehearsed Mahler's Second (Resurrection) Symphony, Gretel met her husband in a Zurich hotel to discuss the terms of their separation. Neppach arrived at their meeting armed with a pistol and after having killed his wife, took his own life with the same weapon.

A cloak of desperation fell upon Bruno Walter and his wife. The Mahler concert on Monday the 21st was cancelled and Toscanini with violinist Adolf Busch, proved themselves to be true friends as they frantically and hastily readied the orchestra together for a replacement concert. The following day they presented themselves at the Zurich crematorium for Grete's funeral honors, at which Walter played on the piano the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. After burying his daughter in the cemetery of Lugano Gentilino and cancelling all obligations, Walter shut himself in the house at Sorengo to grieve. Other events however, soon fell upon all; a few days later in early September following the invasion of Poland, war was declared. It was evident to Walter that remaining in Switzerland until the end of the conflict would reduce any opportunities for work to nothing. The one obligation remaining to him was a return to the NBC Symphony in the spring of the following year: he decided at least to respect that agreement. On November 1st, he embarked from Genoa on the Rex with Elsa and Lotte, bound for New York. Walter knew that his voyage would be without a return. From that moment the United States would become his new country: he assumed American citizenship in 1946.

The second part of this CD's program dates from this year. His professional ties with the Philharmonic-Symphony would last for many years, with Walter accepting the post of Musical Adviser the following year. The concert of May 26, 1946, which is published here for the first time ever, fell within that season (1945-46), which finds him engaged with the orchestra in two periods - the first, from December 1945, during which he conducted four programs. On one of these (December 16th), he led Mozart's D major Violin Concerto (no. 4, K. 218) with Bronislaw Huberman as soloist. The second engagement, from March 1946 saw him on the podium for five programs, which included a repeat performance of the Matthäus Passion. The concert of May 26th therefore represents an isolated appendix to his season. As was custom during the war years, this program was entirely recorded on 16" transcription discs destined for

the armed forces' radio stations. It is fortunate that this program was recently discovered, as it proved to be the last American appearance of Huberman before his return to Europe. Walter and Huberman were friends for many years. The Polish artist, on par with violinists Joseph Szigeti and Adolf Busch, and cellist Emanuel Feuermann, was part of a close circle of the conductor's intimate friends. Walter admired Huberman political involvement, which brought him to oppose the Nazi regime as early as 1933. "I was close to the artist and man," Walter wrote in his memoirs, "although our paths rarely crossed. Even though he completely devoted himself to his art, he was able to actively interest himself in the events of the day, of which he took part in and found a way to harmoniously balance the two, an enviable synthesis which was denied to me." In the same paragraph Walter does not fail to recall how Huberman had founded the Palestine Symphony Orchestra in 1936, an ensemble composed primarily of Jewish musicians who had fled Europe, creating a group of such excellence that Arturo Toscanini was proud to inaugurate it in Tel Aviv on December 26, 1936. Huberman's career seemed to have definitely ended in 1938 following an airplane accident in Sumatra, a crash which resulted in the fracturing of his left wrist and crushing two fingers. With unshakable tenacity, the musician was able to recover the use of his left hand and return to activity. He spent the war years in the United States, appearing as recitalist and with orchestras. The performance with Walter in May 1946 represented, as mentioned earlier, his final concert in America and is the last known extant recording of his playing. On his return to Europe after nearly six years of absence, he took up his old schedule, delighting his numerous admirers. Shortly after an Italian concert tour, he died at home in Nant-sur-Corsier (Vaud) on June 15, 1947: he was 63 years old.

Walter experienced much sorrow from this loss. As an artist, Huberman had much in common with him (boundless admiration for Mozart, an interpretive role in which the emotions had a great part, etc.) but above all, Walter lamented over the profound rectitude of the man, an attribute which made Walter a charismatic figure in the difficult post-war years. After 1945, Walter was often called on to judge the political behavior of many co-nationals ringing at the doorstep of America's rich musical life, especially after 1950, when Rudolf Bing, appointed General Manager of the Metropolitan, first consulted with him before signing up artists who had compromised themselves with Nazi-Fascism. With this difficult obligation, Walter sought to comport himself evenly, casting aside any personal rivalry. His correspondence with Furtwängler during the winter of 1948-49, after the aborted nomination of the latter to lead the Chicago Symphony, is eloquent in its earnestness. In similar hardships, it is not improbable that Walter would have drawn on the energy inspired by the behavior of his friend Huberman, an artist whom Walter evoked in Theme and Variations as one "with intelligence and courage, who in private and in public, spoke out and acted on the dictates of his obligation as a democrat, and from his sense of social responsibility." -- *Michele Selvini* © 2003.

Dr. Michele Selvini is the author of a three volume biography of Bruno Walter: Bruno Walter, La Porta dell' Eternità. It is published by the Fondazione Culturale della Collina d' Oro. 6926 Montagnola, Canton Ticino, Switzerland.

[Arbiter Records Home](#)

[Liner Notes Home](#)

All notes and translations © Allan Evans.