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# TOSCANINI WAGNER

*Immortal Performances*

**DIE WALKÜRE:**

ACT I, SCENE 3: Helen Traubel • Lauritz Melchior  
RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES

**SIEGFRIED: FOREST MURMURS**

**DIE GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG:  
SIEGFRIED'S FUNERAL MUSIC**

NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

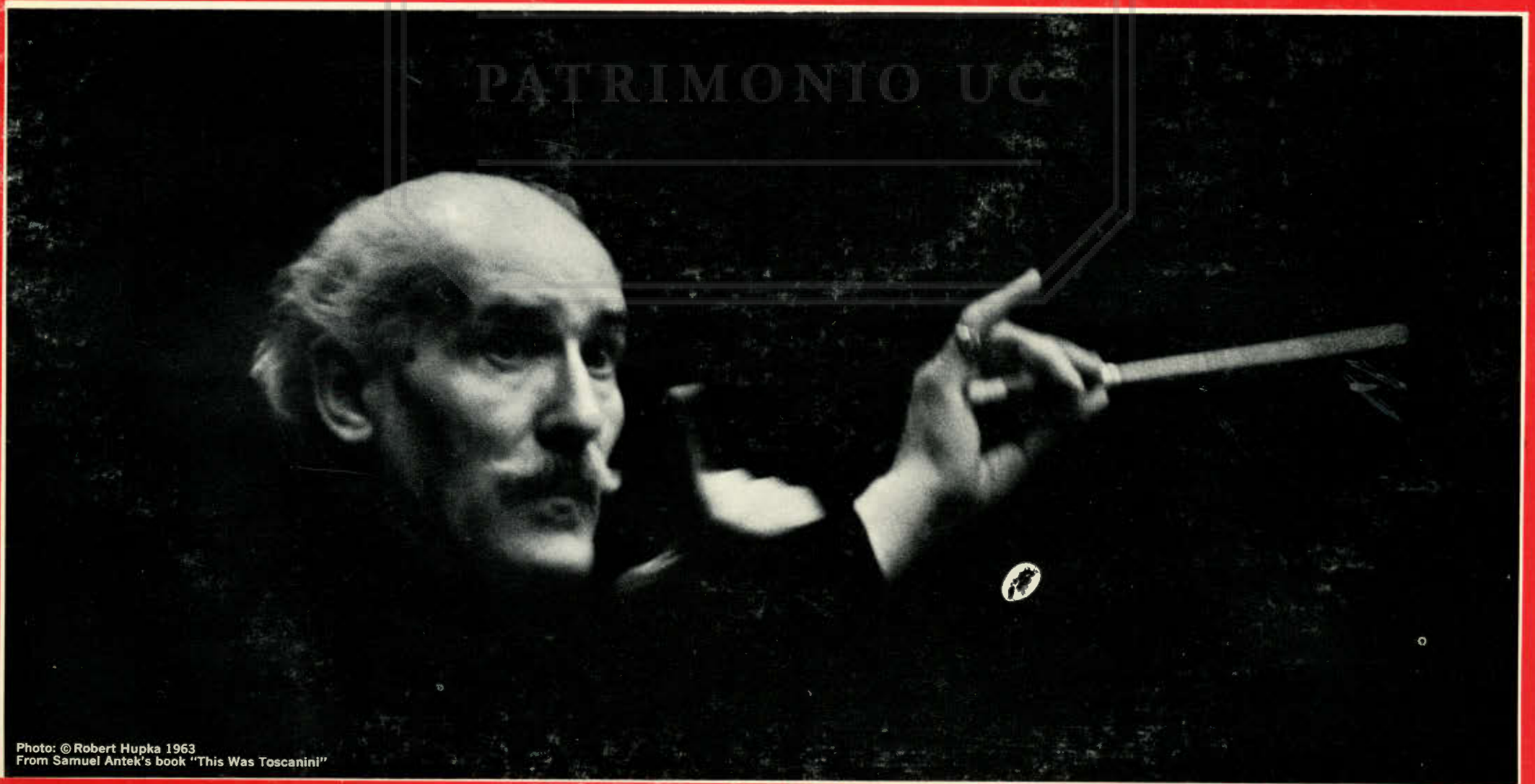


Photo: © Robert Hupka 1963  
From Samuel Antek's book "This Was Toscanini"

ARTURO TOSCANINI • NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

“...he called forth  
from the score  
the heights and depths  
of Wagnerian passions.”

## WAGNER

## Side 1

## Die Walküre

Act I, Scene 3 (25:46)

Helen Traubel, *Soprano* • Lauritz Melchior, *Tenor*  
(From the NBC Broadcast of February 22, 1941 in Carnegie Hall)

## Side 2

## Die Walküre

Act III: Ride of the Valkyries (4:58)

(Recorded January 3, 1952 in Carnegie Hall)

## Siegfried

Act II: Forest Murmurs (8:14)

(Recorded October 29, 1951 in Carnegie Hall)

## Die Götterdämmerung

Act III: Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music (13:18)

(Recorded January 3, 1952 in Carnegie Hall)

The timpani tell the story. The opening rhythmical pattern of percussive sounds magically calls up the mystery of the final scene of the first act of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Countless times audiences have heard this as only another pause before the love scene begins. Yet here in the space of only five bars a feeling of suspense and of the hero's need is made clear.

Such clarity was the goal of Arturo Toscanini. Stripping off bombast and tradition, he went to the core of the music and let sunlight stream into the rich foliage of the Wagnerian forest. Toscanini never reorganized Wagner's orchestral balance—the brass and strings dominate as usual—or exaggerated his tempo markings—no untoward presto or interminable *langsam* here. Instead, with no apologies to the 20th century's fear of excessive emotion, he called forth from the score the heights and depths of Wagnerian passions.

The excitement of the "Ride of the Valkyries" comes alive again; no longer do we hear one dull crescendo after another. In Toscanini's hands each cymbal crash, each reiteration of the familiar motif bring the storm, the rock and the warrior maidens closer in view. The "Forest Murmurs" of *Siegfried* is the pastoral Wagner. Siegfried sprawls under a tree in the forest near the dragon's cave and hears forest sounds, particularly the song of one bird in the tree over him. The scene is the calm antithesis to the Gothic horror of the Wolf's Glen scene in Weber's *Der Freischütz*. "Siegfried's Funeral Music," the final interlude between scenes in *Die Götterdämmerung*, depicts the hero's race in review. All the hopes and dreams of Siegmund and Sieglinde, Siegfried and Brünnhilde and, above all, Wotan

are displayed in this poignant capsulization of the history of the Wälsungs.

Excitement, placidity and tragedy are represented by these three excerpts, but in that from *Die Walküre*, youth and love overwhelm us. Siegmund begins the scene with an agonized call for the magic sword promised by his father. He fails to see the hilt of the sword in the tree and is startled when Sieglinde tells him of it. Swept up in his love for her, he woos her rapturously as moonlight floods the hut. Sieglinde, as much in love as he, questions him as to his origin until she discovers that he is Siegmund, her lost brother. Siegmund draws the sword from the tree and joyously claims Sieglinde as his bride.

The recording comes from a radio broadcast of February 22, 1941. As though to prove the meaning of greatness, the orchestra is alive with passion and spring, with effects more memorable than in the newest stereo recording. For his artists that day the Maestro chose the new Wagnerian team at the Metropolitan Opera—Helen Traubel and Lauritz Melchior. The St. Louis-born soprano came to the company in *The Man Without a Country* in 1937. Two years later on a Wednesday evening in December, she sang her first Wagner—Sieglinde to Melchior's Siegmund and Flagstad's Brünnhilde. In 1941 she became the Wagnerian diva regnant at the Met, and her warm, golden voice poured out waves of voluminous sound for the next ten years. Traubel's Sieglinde here is young yet vibrant, accurate but full of wonder. Note particularly her treatment of the "doch nein" moment; her excitement is palpable. When her voice soars up to name Siegmund, the flood of sound brings back those marvelous years.

From 1926 to 1950 Melchior sang Wagner at the Metropolitan with ease, with power and with compelling beauty. Since he retired, he has not been replaced as Tristan or as Tannhäuser or, above all, as Siegfried. His Siegmund was equally familiar but rarely as well done as here with Toscanini. Held firmly to the notes and forced to interpret, his young Wälsung delights. Not only does his "Wälse!" gleam like a silver sword, but his beautifully phrased "Spring Song" perfectly combines power and lyricism.

Neither singer ever sounded better, but it is Toscanini's orchestra that cannot be forgotten. A great curve of a crescendo from "Der Männer Sippe" to the pell-mell, cascading end of the act fulfills the sweep of feeling that Wagner understood. As a specific example, listen to the "Sword" motif after Siegmund calls for his father; instead of the trumpet mechanically becoming slightly softer on the E, the sound seems to gleam away mysteriously into the night. For the first time the magic and power of the sword become evident. The listener thinks it incredible, a Toscanini interpretation. But a glance at the orchestral score shows that Wagner asked on that note for a diminuendo from a firm forte to piano. Such was Toscanini; he interpreted by making real what the composer wrote. When will there be another like him?

—SPEIGHT JENKINS, JR.

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