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Rediscovering Toscanini: The Man Behind the Legend

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*Arturo Toscanini and Don Gillis in rehearsal, Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas.
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Rediscovering “Toscanini: The Man Behind the Legend”

The following article is based on the authors' presentation at the ARSC Conference in Austin, TX, April 2005. The focus is on the Don Gillis Collection, which the University of North Texas (UNT) Music Library acquired after Gillis's death in 1978. Gillis, a longtime associate of Arturo Toscanini, served as the conductor's assistant and the producer for the NBC Symphony broadcast concerts from 1944 until they ended ten years later. The photographs that illustrate this article are from the collection and are reproduced with permission.

The story of Arturo Toscanini's rise to fame as one of history's most celebrated conductors is well known. Having spent the first several years of his professional life in the opera pit, Toscanini then gained a reputation for his symphonic conducting, serving as principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic from 1929 to 1936. When he left that post and retired to his native Italy, his American fans believed they would never again see the maestro conduct here. At the age of 70, however, when most individuals are happily settled into retirement, Toscanini returned to the podium, this time in a completely new and, in some ways controversial, forum, as head of the recently organized NBC Symphony. He would remain with the orchestra until his final departure in 1954. Toscanini died three years later in New York, just two months before his ninetieth birthday.

Toscanini's association with the NBC Symphony has been documented by a number of writers, most notably by Joseph Horowitz in his harsh, revisionist study, *Understanding Toscanini*, and more sympathetically in Mortimer H. Frank's 2002 book *Arturo Toscanini, the NBC Years*.¹ As Donald C. Meyer has noted, this new venture was unique in orchestral history – the NBC Symphony lasted only for seventeen years, had only one principal conductor (Toscanini), and was “owned and operated by a single corporate entity, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC)”. Meyer notes that this endeavor was a “uniquely American phenomenon: a commercial network dabbling in fine orchestral music, struggling with its conflicting urges between public service and profit, high culture and entertainment”.²

It was Toscanini's reputation in the opera and concert halls that had compelled David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, NBC's parent company, so assiduously to seek out the maestro to head his corporation's new enterprise in 1937. But it was primarily Toscanini's tenure with NBC, and his recordings, that secured the conductor's legacy. Because of this association, today we can appreciate and understand Toscanini's artistry and his mystique much more fully, since most of Toscanini's commercial recordings were made after he came to NBC. These recordings are available today on compact disc, through the comprehensive



Don Gillis, Al Hauser Associates. Reproduced with permission.



Toscanini and Gillis confer, Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas. Reproduced with permission.

82-disc set RCA reissued between 1990 and 1992. Seventy-four discs of this set include all of Toscanini's approved performances with the NBC Symphony; in addition, there are early acoustic La Scala Orchestra recordings (1920-21) and some recordings from the 1930s and 1940s with the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mortimer Frank discusses this recorded legacy in painstaking detail, and includes in his book a season-by-season chronology of broadcast performances of the NBC Symphony, a repertory list, a comprehensive discography that chronicles the conductor's recording career, as well as lists of authorized and rejected recordings, non-broadcast concerts, other conductors' performances with the symphony, and a separate videography.

Commercial recordings remain among the most important and widely used types of primary sources in the study of conductors and their performances. But these sources reveal only part of the story. As thorough as Frank's discography and survey of Toscanini's performances are, other documents not listed in his book also bear consideration in any full examination of Toscanini's life and career. Among these sources are materials in the Don Gillis Collection, acquired by the University of North Texas Music Library as a gift from Don Gillis's widow, Barbara Gillis, following her husband's death in 1978.

Gillis, a longtime associate of Toscanini, was himself a prominent and prolific composer and arranger who had served as the conductor's assistant and the producer for the NBC Symphony broadcast concerts from 1944 until they ended ten years later. He had been summoned to New York from Chicago, where he worked as a producer for the local NBC affiliate, in addition to serving as trombone instructor and band director at his alma mater, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth (1935-1942). Gillis also received a Masters degree from North Texas State Teachers College (now University of North Texas) in 1944. The management at NBC took full advantage of Gillis's multiple talents – in addition to acting as chief producer, Gillis also played trombone, composed, arranged, and wrote scripts for the NBC concert programs.³ Following Toscanini's death and the disbanding of the orchestra, it was Gillis who re-organized the NBC Symphony under the new name Symphony of the Air.

The Gillis archive meticulously documents Gillis's own multifaceted life in music, as a performer, composer, arranger, radio producer, and educator. The Toscanini-related materials in the collection include all the usual types of archival documents – letters, clippings, press releases, reviews, radio program scripts, etc. Perhaps equally if not more important are the hundreds of tape recordings that Gillis possessed. These tapes fall into several categories: recordings of Gillis's own music, which complement the manuscripts and other related material in the archive; rehearsals of the NBC Symphony; complete tapes of the NBC Radio programs "Toscanini: The Man behind the Legend" and the "Toscanini Centennial Series"; and the interviews conducted for these two programs.

According to a 1966 article by Gillis in *Allegro*, the radio series "Toscanini: The Man behind the Legend" was the brainchild of NBC Radio's vice-president for programming, Robert Wogan. In early 1963 Wogan approached Gillis and Toscanini's son, Walter, with the idea to present a thirteen-week series of radio programs that recalled the "golden years of the Toscanini life and legend".⁴ Walter Toscanini agreed to let Gillis use the Toscanini Archives, then housed in the family's home, Villa Pauline, in Riverdale, N.Y. In addition, the American Federation of Musicians granted the rights to the NBC Symphony rehearsals that had been recorded. What initially began as one thirteen-week series continued for four years, culminating in the year-long "Centennial Series," which



Informal party including Don Gillis, lower right, and Toscanini, center; Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas. Reproduced with permission.

ran throughout 1967, marking the hundredth anniversary of the conductor's birth. Gillis wrote that the programs were intended "to explore the legends, to examine the myths, and to probe deeply into the many facets of Maestro's artistic life which caused him to become so uniquely the Maestro".⁵ The weekly programs included not only performances by the NBC Symphony, but also rehearsals, biographical commentary, and interviews of hundreds of individuals, persons "great and small," from esteemed conductors, critics, composers, and performers, to former players in the orchestra and members of Toscanini's household staff – his cook, valet, and driver. As Gillis noted, the programs, in addition to their focus on Toscanini's music-making, helped to "tell the story of Maestro at home, the man of family in his hours away from the podium".⁶

The wide array of interview subjects results in great diversity in the contents of the show. Themes range from opinions about the maestro's musical style and legacy to his strong preference for soup. Interviews with Walter and Walfredo Toscanini provide personal insights into the man as a father and grandfather. Edith Kusterman, a cook who worked in both the Toscanini and Koussevitsky households, compares the atmosphere and domestic routines of the two homes. Composers, conductors, instrumentalists, and singers rhapsodize about Toscanini's musicality, while critics describe their professional and personal assessments of the great man. A conversation with Argentine wrestler Antonino Rocca is one of the most humorous, if rather bizarre, interviews in the collection. Rocca recounts how he would spar with the Maestro, and describes Toscanini as "a natural".

In many ways, it was Don Gillis himself who was the man behind the legend.

The popularity and longevity of the series, at a time when such live, commercial radio programs would soon become largely a thing of the past, were a testament to the enduring popularity of Toscanini. Gillis wrote that these programs introduced a whole new generation to Toscanini: "The most amazing thing that happened . . . was that we began hearing from so many teen-agers wanting to know more about Maestro. Some letters were from youngsters who, of their own volition, had pooled their collections of Toscanini recordings and got together regularly to listen to them."⁷ Other young people wrote to express regret at not having seen Maestro in person.

Some critics might view the programs simply as an extension of the NBC-perpetuated hagiography of the conductor with little critically balanced perspective – of continuing the Toscanini "myth." To be sure, nothing in the programs alludes to Toscanini's extra-marital affairs or criticizes his musical interpretations or choice of repertoire. On the other hand, it is possible that a fuller and more balanced view of Toscanini emerges when scholars can examine the unpublished, unedited documents such as those available in the Gillis archive.

The University of North Texas Music Library is pleased to be the custodian of this important collection, and has taken steps to preserve the collection and at the same time make it more available to scholars. With the financial assistance of several private donors, the UNT Music Library staff began to restore and transfer to CD all of the almost five hundred tapes in the Don Gillis Collection in 1994. The tapes were assessed by consultant Steve Smolian, who made recommendations for how to proceed with the preservation and transfer of the tapes. The next several years were spent raising additional money to purchase equipment and furniture for a sound preservation studio, which was completed in 1998. Monetary donations provided for the purchase of equipment for this project, related consulting fees, blank media, and wages for the student assistants who carried out the work. The studio was also designed for future similar projects.

The majority of the tapes are acetate 1/4-inch tapes and are recorded at either 15 or 30 IPS, mono. When the project began, the condition of the tapes was less than pristine, but the two most common problems, broken splices and edge warping from previous scattering were fairly simple to repair. Two refurbished Otari MTR-10 tape recorders were acquired to play the tapes in both the restoration and transfer phases of the project. Each tape was cleaned, splices repaired, and timing and speed noted. After restoration work, the tapes were wound slowly to ensure even tape pack, housed on new reels and in new boxes when necessary, and set aside for six months.

For the transfer phase, the tapes were copied directly to CD using a Marantz CDR610KMII CD burner, with no editing or cleaning of the sound. Direct-to-computer file transfer was not considered at the time because of the infeasibility of file storage and management. Student assistants indexed the discs according to content at the time of the transfer. In the years since, other students have worked on projects to identify more precisely the individuals interviewed. After transfer, the tapes were all wound slowly and stored tail out.

The original tapes and CD transfers are now kept in climate- and humidity-controlled storage in the Music Library. Access to the recordings is provided within the Library for researchers with special permission. In addition, a web site for the Don Gillis Collection (<http://www.library.unt.edu/music/gillis/>) includes finding aids for both Gillis's work and papers and the Toscanini collection.

Conference Playlist

The following, recorded between 1963 and 1967, were played during the authors' conference presentation.

1. Host Ben Grauer introduces "Toscanini: The Man Behind the Legend".
2. Eugene Ormandy shares his initial impressions of Toscanini and eventual change-of-heart.
3. Lotte Lehmann talks about the Maestro's influence.
4. Conductor Wilfred Pelletier retells the handkerchief anecdote used by Toscanini to demonstrate the mood he wanted them to achieve in their playing.
5. Aaron Copland tells the story of the premiere of *El Salon Mexico*.
6. Leonard Myers from the NBC press department tells a story about a concert in Austin from the 1950 trans-continental tour.
7. Wrestler Antonino Rocca talks about Toscanini's natural talent for wrestling.
8. Edith Kusterman, the Toscanini's cook for several years, compares the Toscanini and Koussevitsky households.

Through his production of the radio shows and his subsequent efforts to deposit these source materials in a library archive, Don Gillis helped the public discover a more intimate side of one of the century's greatest conductors. The University of North Texas likewise hopes that its efforts in preserving these materials will provide researchers the opportunity to rediscover the man behind the Toscanini myth.

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Endnotes

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joseph Horowitz, Joseph, Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music (New York: Knopf, 1986); Arturo Toscanini: the NBC Years (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2002). 2. Donald C. Meyer, "Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra: High, Middle, and Low Culture, 1937-1954," in Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950, ed. Michael Saffle, Essays in American Music, v. 3, 301 (New York: Garland, 2000). | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Robert Farnon Society Web site, http://www.rfsoc.org.uk/cds_2003.shtml, accessed 1/04/06. 4. Don Gillis, "The Man Behind the Legend," <i>Allegro</i> (January 1966): 6. 5. <i>Ibid.</i> 6. <i>Ibid.</i>, 7. 7. <i>Ibid.</i> |
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