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*Toscanini: In His Own Words* (review)

Ivan Shulman

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Another example suggests a more willful filmmaker. During an extended excerpt from the Sixth Symphony, which Vaughan Williams famously denied as being about war, Palmer assembles a lengthy concatenation of scenes of mass graves, woodlands, orchestral players, marching soldiers, an array of more recent war images including a stealth fighter, and finally a photo of the composer looking pensive. The spoken message of the film—that Vaughan Williams is more than the quintessential amateurish pastoralist—seems to be expanded during these montages into an appeal to hear Vaughan Williams encoding

existential struggle in the sounds themselves. This would be very subversive truth indeed, but it is not an inevitable one. Perhaps these moments of the film are best thought of as Palmer's creative rejoinder, based on his personal experience of the music and its composer.

Finally, the montages do not prevent the film from succeeding as informative biopic, earnest homage, engaging narrative, or committed introduction to the music, and for all of those reasons it is recommended.

KEVIN SALFEN

*Southern Methodist University*

**Toscanini: In His Own Words.** DVD (Widescreen ed). Directed by Larry Weinstein. [United States]: Medici Arts International, 2009. 3077928. \$24.99.

Cinematic docudramas and docufictions seem to be in vogue today (*Frost/Nixon* and *Lives of Others* come easily to mind). This, combined with the ability of DVDs to reach a niche audience, affords filmmakers an opportunity to approach subjects which otherwise might never see the light of day. Larry Weinstein's recent work *Toscanini: In His Own Words* is based upon over 150 hours of surreptitiously recorded taped interviews made by Arturo Toscanini's son, Walter at his Wave Hill home in New York during the 1950s. In this film, these multiple revelations are woven together to create one fictional New Year's Eve celebration at home in 1954 where a widowed Toscanini (Barry Jackson) is joined by his son Walter (Joseph Long), his daughter Wally (Carolina Giammetta), the Canadian conductor Wilfred Pelletier (Michael Brandon), his long serving assistant and friend Anita Colombo (Jennie Goossens), and Iris Cantelli, the wife of his protégé, conductor Guido Cantelli (Valentina Chico) for a discussion of the maestro's entire life.

While the performances seem to be a bit contrived and melodramatic, there is unquestionable elegance in the setting and efforts to explore the mystique of Toscanini through this representation of his thoughts. From the film, Toscanini emerges as a highly self-critical man, who equally spared no one his views and opinions on music and the world. The result of this is a contemporary, perhaps revisionist view of Toscanini, as more modern man

than might otherwise be expected, with a deep moral sense of duty and humanity, which was tempered by infidelity and personal doubt. His political views about Mussolini and Hitler, his opinions of the music of Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, and Catalani, of performers such as Geraldine Farrar, Maria Callas, and Leopold Stokowski bear witness to his sharp tongue and incisive mind. Quotes such as "I recognize only the stars in heaven" and "You can't understand a word she sings" remind us of the power that the conductors exerted during the Toscanini years, and which have been replaced by an egalitarianism which would have appalled him had he been alive today.

The skillful interposition of vibrant kinescopic archival footage and recordings along with reconstructed black and white as well as color video images contribute much to the warmth of the film, adding to this viewer's perception of Toscanini as a less formidable man than before. (Full disclosure: my father played in the NBC Symphony under Toscanini, and I heard many stories of those sessions.) Watching his eyes in the final scene conducting the *Liebestod*, one can still feel the power of Toscanini's music making, after all these years. Curious inconsistencies appear throughout the film (is an accelerando really a dynamic marking?) and the obvious imposition of a recording of the Valkyries over a different video track results in a lack of synchronization that is jarring to say the least. Lastly, the use of more recent recordings by per-

formers other than Toscanini seemed out of place, and unnecessary. The value of this film however is in its intent, to successfully provide rare insight into the life of the Maestro through this unique and personal

source. To that effort, Walter Toscanini might really emerge as the most important character in this film.

IVAN SHULMAN

*California State University, Long Beach*

**We Want the Light.** DVD. Directed by Christopher Nupen. West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 2009, 2003. D0909. \$29.99.

*We Want the Light*, by acclaimed documentary filmmaker, Christopher Nupen, explores the complex relationship that Jewish musicians and German composers have shared for the last two hundred and fifty years. Drawing from a rich menu of interviews with prominent musicians, scholars, critics, and Holocaust survivors, Nupen presents an intriguing investigation of music's power and meaning. *We Want the Light* originated as an hour-long 2003 special for the BBC. The 2009 two-DVD set begins with that BBC special, a well-crafted documentary which falls into three parts: 1) German history and Jewish assimilation; 2) Richard Wagner's influence; and 3) the fallout from Hitler's adoption of Wagner. Nupen tells this story through interviews, musical performances, and primary source readings. Underscoring it all are extended excerpts from various composers ranging from Bach to Brahms to Franz Waxman. Nupen covers a lot of historical ground and manages to find the right balance of scholarly context, musical reflection, and colorful (often heartbreaking) anecdotes from the survivors. The images throughout *We Want the Light* are mainly of the interviewees, but Nupen also incorporates excellent live performance footage, most of which effectively focuses our attention on the music rather than the technique or personality of the performer(s). Also included is a rare clip from a concert in Rishon LeZion, Israel in which the Israel Symphony attempts to perform Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* over the protests of an angry listener shaking a rattle. Nupen concludes the first DVD by presenting the entire documentary soundtrack

again but without interviews or narration; the images here are drawn almost completely from live performances. As Nupen notes in the DVD introduction, the documentary repeatedly emphasizes music's ability to communicate more vividly than words. The separate music track, recorded in Dolby Digital 5.1, is intended to encourage viewers to return to the music itself and reflect on the context *We Want the Light* has just described. On the second DVD, Nupen presents extended clips from the eighteen interviews he conducted for the documentary. Included is a stunning performance by Evgeny Kissin, whose interview did not make the final cut, but whose playing of the slow movement from Brahms Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5 powerfully captures Nupen's overarching point that music, though abstract and imprecise, has the ability to cut deep into our emotional being.

This is Nupen's tenth documentary, all now available on DVD. His earlier projects focused on performers (Segovia, Kissin, Perlman, du Pré, Milstein, Ashkenazy), or composers (Schubert and Sibelius), so *We Want the Light* cuts a new path, and in doing so confirms Nupen's mastery of the classical music documentary. The sound quality and image clarity are excellent. The DVD menus are thorough, clearly organized, and easily navigated. *We Want the Light* is intended for general audiences, but will also be of great use to specialists in Wagner, the Holocaust, German history, political music, and even documentary film production.

JAMES M. DOERING

*Randolph-Macon College*

**Walter Felsenstein Edition.** DVD. Film restoration edition. [Halle an der Saale, Germany]: Arthaus Musik, 2007. 101 345. \$149.99.

Walter Felsenstein, the founder and director of Berlin's Komische Oper from 1947 until his death in 1975, is often cited

as a pioneer by today's proponents of "opera as theater." Unlike many directors of his era, many of his productions were