

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23, B-flat Minor--Vladimir Horowitz, piano; Arturo Toscanini; conductor; NBC Symphony Orchestra (April 25, 1943)

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Essay by Cesare Civetta (guest post)*



Toscanini



Horowitz

Tchaikovsky was in his early 30s when he wrote his First Piano Concerto. Completed in 1875, it was composed in just four months. Vladimir Horowitz was born in Ukraine in 1903 and was a phenomenal child prodigy. In 1928, he made his successful United States debut in Carnegie Hall playing this concerto. Arturo Toscanini, born in Italy in 1867, was a champion of many composers who were his contemporaries. He conducted the Italian premieres of Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" and his "Pathétique Symphony." On his very first symphony concert in 1896, Toscanini conducted Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite," which had only been composed four years earlier.

Horowitz's first collaboration with Toscanini was in 1933 playing Beethoven's "Emperor Concerto" with the New York Philharmonic. Despite the fact that he was gay, that year Horowitz married Toscanini's daughter, Wanda. Toscanini didn't usually conduct concertos, but he admired Horowitz's playing and they got along well. If there were any interpretive disagreements, Horowitz always yielded to the maestro. In subsequent years Horowitz and Toscanini performed Brahms's "First Piano Concerto" and performed and recorded Brahms's Second Piano Concerto and, in 1941, Tchaikovsky's "First Piano Concerto." On April 25, 1943, they performed it with the NBC Symphony Orchestra as part of an all-Tchaikovsky concert in Carnegie Hall. Tickets to the concert were only available by purchasing war bonds to help pay for the United States' participation in World War II. Neither Horowitz nor Toscanini accepted a fee for their services. The event yielded \$11 million!

The acoustics of Carnegie Hall are rather dry, which was made all the more dry that day because the hall was sold out. As with many of Toscanini's recordings, this is not a pleasant ambiance in which to hear music. In the recording of the performance the piano is too prominent, resulting in an unnatural balance between it and the orchestra. It is particularly noticeable in the first movement during the passages where Tchaikovsky indicated that the violins play with mutes. On the other hand, it's a pleasure to clearly hear Horowitz's performance due to the microphones' close proximity to the piano.

Horowitz's virtuosity is incredible, especially evident in the cadenzas, in the rapid-fire octaves in the first and third movements, and in the fast passages in the second and third movements. Conductor and soloist are well united throughout the concerto, except for seven bars in the second movement beginning at bar 50 where Horowitz played ahead of the orchestra. It's not disastrous, however, because Tchaikovsky didn't write any down beats in the accompaniment.

At bar 68 in the first movement, there is a magical slight stretching of time during the first beat of the bar. Toscanini's conducting and Karl Glassman's playing of the dramatic crescendo, timing, and climax of the timpani roll in that bar is stupendous!

At the end of the first movement, Horowitz utilizes the sustain pedal during the three bars before the final bar.

In the third movement, Toscanini's violin section plays with portamenti (slides) in bars 60 and 62, which brings out the singing quality of the music.

Beginning at bar 234, for 20 bars leading up to the famous octave passage in the piano part, Toscanini builds up the crescendo, as Tchaikovsky marked, "little by little" in an extraordinary manner that leads to Horowitz's thunderous octaves, producing an absolutely over-the-top climax! In bar 263, Horowitz plays an F dominant seventh chord instead of the printed A-natural octaves. There is a slight slowing of the pace during the concerto's penultimate bar.

Horowitz liked to play this concerto very fast because this provided him with the opportunity to show off his unique virtuosity. Toscanini's customary passion is partly reflected in the performance's fast tempi. The audience's excitement about the combination of these two internationally beloved artists in assisting with the war effort against Hitler is certainly reflected back to the performers. During the final note of the performance, the audience begins to applaud.

Cesare Civetta is a critically-acclaimed conductor who has appeared with over 60 orchestras in 15 countries, and was the first non-Russian conductor to perform throughout a transcontinental tour of the former Soviet Union. He is also the author of "The Real Toscanini: Musicians Reveal the Maestro," and is the conductor of the Beethoven Festival Orchestra in New York City.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.