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The Beecham Collection

BEECHAM, FLAGSTAD

AND WAGNER (1813 - 1883)



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|-----|-------------------------------|------|------|-----------------------------|-------|
| [1] | Overture, The Flying Dutchman | 9:57 | [6] | 4. Schmerzen | 2:13 |
| [2] | Lohengrin, Prelude to Act I * | 9:24 | [7] | 5. Träume | 5:02 |
| | Wesendonck-Lieder | | [8] | Tristan und Isolde | |
| [3] | 1. Der Engel | 2:55 | [9] | Prelude & | 9:11 |
| [4] | 2. Stehe still! | 3:50 | [10] | Liebestod | 7:28 |
| [5] | 3. Im Treibhaus | 5:59 | | Kirsten Flagstad -- Talk on | |
| | | | | Singing Wagner | 10:43 |

Total duration 67:33

Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., C.H.

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, * BBC Symphony Orchestra, Kirsten Flagstad, Soprano

- [1] Royal Festival Hall, London 22.11.1954 [2] Royal Festival Hall, London 25.11.1953
[3] - [9] Studio 1, Maida Vale, London 21.12.1952 [10] Kirsten Flagstad, 1949

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The Beecham Collection

Previously Unissued Recordings



BEECHAM, FLAGSTAD
& WAGNER

Wesendonck Lieder

Prelude & Liebestod
Tristan und Isolde

Royal Philharmonic
Orchestra
Kirsten Flagstad
Sir Thomas Beecham,
Bart., C.H.

Today we do not necessarily associate the name of Sir Thomas Beecham with either Wagner or Kirsten Flagstad, yet those increasingly fewer who had the privilege of hearing Sir Thomas conduct Wagner attest to his mastery of interpretation with this composer every bit as much as with his Mozart, Berlioz or Delius – a fact borne out by no less a person than the erudite critic and Wagnerian, Ernest Newman, when he wrote of Beecham's direction of the May 1932 Covent Garden season including *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Tannhäuser* and *Götterdämmerung* (with Frida Leider, Herbert Janssen and Lauritz Melchior) as being "electrifying" and asking "what results might not Sir Thomas achieve with not only a first-rate orchestra but with singers trained by himself". By 1934 Sir Thomas had his superb new London Philharmonic Orchestra in the Royal Opera House pit for the "Ring Cycle" (with a very similar cast) and *Die Meistersinger* and Newman's widow, Vera, recalled her husband's view of this being "one of the best Covent Garden seasons for some time" and that "the glory of that particular *Ring* was undoubtedly the orchestra under Beecham".

For the 1936 "Ring Cycle" Newman continued to praise Beecham interpretations and was able to enthuse especially about two new voices in the cast – Kirsten Thorberg as Fricka ("This was the finest Fricka I have ever seen, or hope to see, something at which Wagner himself would have danced with delight") and Kirsten Flagstad as Brünnhilde. Flagstad returned to sing Isolde for Beecham in the following year and Newman was able to confirm his opinion of this new voice: "We were so delighted to have the music sung for once that there was little room left in the minds of her hearers for criticism of other points. She is, before everything else, a singer. The voice is beautiful and she uses it with an ease that perplexes us... Whether it is that Mme. Flagstad is 'a natural singer', or whether it is that her art is so consummate that it conceals every trace of art, I will not attempt to decide... The steadiness of the tone is as remarkable as its purity... So steady is the line, so good Mme. Flagstad's ear, that even Mr. Melchior's deviation from the pitch... could not deflect her from the path of vocal virtue even when the two voices were sounding together."

Apparently Flagstad was not always comfortable with her conductors but two for whom she had the utmost respect and with whom she got on well were Fritz Reiner and Sir Thomas Beecham. Given that fact, it is a pity that she did not do more with him but she was not available for the 1938 and 1939 seasons at Covent Garden, after which the war years intervened. However, there were to be two more collaborations, the first on 24th November 1947 when Beecham took his Royal Philharmonic Orchestra into the Royal Albert Hall to give a concert in aid of the British Empire Nurses' Memorial Fund in an all-Wagner

evening except for one work by Josef Holbrooke. Flagstad sang Elisabeth's Prayer and Greeting from *Tannhäuser* and was joined by Set Svanholm for the Act 1 duet from *Die Walküre*. She joined Sir Thomas for the last time in December 1952 with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the BBC Studio 1 at Maida Vale, for his Christmas concert on 21st of the month. On this occasion she sang the Wagner: *Wesendonck Lieder* (*WWW 91*), Beecham conducting it complete for the only time in his long career, plus the *Liebestod* in the performance of the *Prelude und Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde* in a programme which began with *Richard Strauss: Suite: Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and was transmitted on the Third Programme at 21.50. Six months later, on 5th July 1953, she sang her last operatic performance in London. It is good to hear on this disc Kirsten Flagstad speaking both modestly, honestly and wisely about her approach to singing Wagner but not without humour. It should be required listening for all would-be Wagnerian singers today!

Very few remain who witnessed the Wagner "Ring" cycles conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham to great acclaim at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, before the Second World War, the last being in June 1939. A few more of us were lucky enough to have experienced his last Wagner opera performances there in 1951, when he conducted *Die Meistersinger* in the June, July and December of that year, his last appearances at Covent Garden, with casts that included Elisabeth Grummer (Eva), Ludwig Weber (Pogner), Hans Hotter (Sachs) and Geraint Evans (Nightwatchman). For all who can remember those evenings, there is no doubt that Beecham was a great Wagnerian. For others, whose memories of Sir Thomas rest mainly on the concerts of the last decade of his life, it is the occasional presenting of overtures and isolated items from Wagner's operas that gave them a glimpse of his way with that composer.

The contrast in the quantity of Wagner he conducted in those last years compared with the first forty or so years of his conducting career is quite marked. From 1951 he gave us just two full Wagner evenings in the concert hall (in 1953 and 1956), plus one half Wagner concert in 1958. Otherwise it appears that no more than 35 Wagner items, mainly overtures, found their way into some 250 concerts that he conducted in that last decade. An analysis of the extant programme information to date, largely compiled by Maurice Parker and Anthony Benson, shows Wagner's music appearing with great regularity over the first forty years of his concert life, from including the *Introduction to Act 3 of Die Meistersinger* in his very first concert on 8th November 1899 and the overture to that opera in his second concert, with the Hallé Orchestra, on 6th December 1899. Both works were to remain favourites of his throughout his life, giving the latter well over 100 times. Also in that second programme he conducted the Overture to *Tannhäuser*, which he was to play on some 130 future occasions. Altogether Beecham gave concert performances of over sixty-five different Wagnerian operatic extracts, including overtures, as well as the

Siegfried Idyll and the *Faust Overture*. In the opera house he conducted *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der fliegende Holländer* all for the first time by 1910, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, all by 1913 and adding *Lohengrin* later. Of these, *Tristan und Isolde* with over sixty complete staged performances and *Die Meistersinger* with some forty were clearly his favourites. *Parsifal* as an opera did not appeal to him, yet the *Good Friday Music* did appear in his concert programmes from 1911 to 1944 and his account of this music was always particularly beautiful, deeply felt and never maudlin.

Of the 1935 Royal Opera House memorable performances of the "Ring" plus *Tristan* and *Lohengrin*, when his casts included Lotte Lehmann, Frida Leider, Rudolf Böckelmann, Herbert Janssen, Alexander Kipnis, Lauritz Melchior and Torsten Ralf, Neville Cardus wrote:

The tendency of German conductors of Wagner has usually been towards emphasis on harmonic change and fullness; such emphasis favoured a conception of "The Ring" which had implications of philosophy. Sir Thomas concentrated on the dramatic and picturesque parts of the score. I doubt if he often looked at Wagner's verbal text. In "The Ring" the orchestra was for Sir Thomas three parts of the cycle's substance and interest. Seldom has Wagner sounded as elegantly garbed of texture as in these "Ring" performances at Covent Garden in 1935. If we missed a deep fundamental tone and a consequent solemnity, we received in exchange a rare beauty of musical shapeliness.

The care which Beecham lavished on Wagner's orchestral writing was evident in all his performances but his own philosophy towards Wagner's operatic aesthetic was more than hinted at in his 1944 autobiographical volume, *A Mingled Chime*, when he wrote of a popular musical conception:

...while the pantheist Beethoven represents a spirit completely in accordance with that of the struggle to preserve the religious ideals of the past nineteen hundred years, the Christian Wagner is as much of an opposing element to him as Beelzebub was to Jehovah. How the creator of Der fliegende Holländer, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin and Parsifal, all quasi-religious dramas in praise of the creed, the traditions and virtues of the ancient faith, could ever be regarded as other than the most stalwart and persuasive champion it has produced for centuries passes my comprehension. Even the pagan Ring, considered didactically, is a weighty sermon on the anti-Christian vices of lust of power, fraud, the arbitrary exercise of force and the tragic consequences that proceed from them.

While the "Suite" from *Die Meistersinger* – the *Introduction to Act 3*, *Dance of the Apprentices* and the *Entry of the Masters* – retained its regular place in Beecham programmes from 1926 to 1956 and always gave his audiences, his players and himself much pleasure in performance, the *Overture to Der fliegende Holländer* performances spanned the years 1908 to 1956 on a similar number of occasions, totalling some sixty in all. Although he conducted this opera just three times in 1910, the feel for the tenderness, as well as the mystery and drama of the work and the essence of seafaring never failed to be fully projected in his electrifying interpretations of the *Overture*, as anyone who has stood on the bridge of a ship in a storm and felt the power and exhilaration of the sea will vouch. The performance recorded here was given in the Royal Festival Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra opening the St. Cecilia's Day concert on 22nd November 1954, which also included music by Liszt, Franck, Elgar and Borodin.

The last full Wagner evening Sir Thomas gave in the concert hall was in the Royal Festival Hall with the RPO on 6th December 1956, opening with the finest account of the *Overture to Rienzi* which I had ever heard up to then or since. Along with extracts from *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, we were given the *Entry of the Gods* from *Das Rheingold*, *Forest Murmurs* from *Siegfried*, *Siegfried's Rhine Journey* from *Götterdämmerung* and the *Good Friday Music* from *Parsifal*. The extraordinary sensitivity of feeling for the music of *Siegfried's Rhine Journey* Beecham also could carry over so well into the sombre, dramatic power and chilling thrill of the *Funeral Music* from *Götterdämmerung*, again demonstrating Beecham's innate understanding of the essence of Wagner's scores lying not in the vocal lines but in the wonder of the orchestral writing. This attention to the beauty of line coupled with the powerful emotion in the sweep of the music can be heard in the *Prelude to Lohengrin* recorded here opening the Royal Festival Hall concert on 25th November 1953 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in a programme which also included works by Arnell, Delius and Beethoven.

Sir Thomas Beecham had a further valid thought on music and his relation to Wagner's *Tristan* in particular, when he wrote:

Everyone is privileged to read into music that which dogs his own private thoughts and emotions. But if anyone can find in the great love drama a single sign that Wagner did not look upon the passion of its protagonists as a dream outside all practical fulfilment in a world dominated by the claims of duty and honour, it must be someone with a telescopic vision denied to ordinary creatures like myself. The plain fact is that music per se means nothing: it is sheer sound and the interpreter

*can do no more with it than his own capacities, mental and spiritual, will allow,
and the same applies to the listener.*

It seemed so often that Sir Thomas Beecham's capacity was infinite.

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Kirsten Flagstad