



Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., CH



The Beecham Collection

Premier CD Release



EDWARD ELGAR
Enigma Variations

Including music by Grétry,
Liszt, Franck *et al*

Rosina Raisbeck, Soprano
Royal Philharmonic
Orchestra
Sir Thomas Beecham,
Bart., C.H



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BEECHAM IN CONCERT
Music by
Boccherini, Grétry, Liszt, Franck & Elgar

[1] Luigi Boccherini – Overture in D 8:06

André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry – Ballet Suite *Zémire et Azor*

[2] *Entrée* 3:56
[3] *Passepied* 2:15
[4] *Air de ballet* 4:52
[5] *Sir Thomas to audience...* 0:15
[6] *Entr'acte* 2:19
[7] *Finale* 1:41

[8] Franz Liszt – *Die Loreley* 7:34
(with Rosina Raisbec, soprano)

[9] César Franck – *Le Chasseur Maudit* 13:22
(with Alan Civil, horn)

Edward Elgar – Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma' for Orchestra, Op. 36

[10] *Theme* 1:23
[11] Var. 1 C.A.E. (Caroline Alice Elgar) 1:40
[12] Var. 2 H.D.S.-P (Hew David Steuart-Powell) 0:45
[13] Var. 3 R.B.T. (Richard Baxter Townshend) 1:18
[14] Var. 4 W.M.B. (William Meath Baker) 0:26
[15] Var. 5 R.P.A. (Richard P. Arnold) 1:51

[16] Var. 6	Ysobel (Isabel Fitton)	1:23
[17] Var. 7	Troyte (Troyte Griffith)	0:55
[18] Var. 8	W.N. (Winifred Norbury)	1:37
[19] Var. 9	Nimrod (Arthur J. Jaeger)	3:35
[20] Var. 10	Intermezzo – Dorabella (Dora Penny)	3:12
[21] Var. 11	G.R.S. (George Robertson Sinclair)	0:57
[22] Var. 12	B.G.N. (Basil G. Nevinson)	2:24
[23] Var. 13	*** (Lady Mary Trefusis)	2:48
[24] Var. 14	E.D.U. (The composer)	4:42

Total Duration: 73:43

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

Tracks [1] & [2] - [7]: Usher Hall, Edinburgh Festival (23.8.56).

Tracks [8] - [24]: Royal Festival Hall, London (St. Cecilia's Day Concert, 22.11.54).

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BEECHAM IN CONCERT

A concert programme of works such as those which feature on this disc was familiar fare in the Beecham years, with rare exceptions always of pieces which appealed to his wide taste, and interspersed with occasional one-composer concerts of those especially dear to him such as Mozart, Delius, Sibelius or Richard Strauss.

Of course, when Sir Thomas first began his conducting career in 1899, programmes were longer and often with an assortment of short vocal and instrumental solo pieces inserted among the more substantial orchestral items. Yet by the time he had established his first orchestra, the Beecham Symphony Orchestra, in 1909 such programmes were beginning to give way to concerts of a more compact and selective nature, already moving towards the more common pattern based on overture-concerto-symphony, which held sway, if not exclusively, from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805) was one of those composers from whose large output just a few works would take Beecham's fancy and which he would programme from time to time. Two of Boccherini's symphonies occasionally featured, as well as the *Violoncello Concerto in Bb* (G.482) (with Piatigorsky in 1937 and Fournier in Edinburgh in 1950). However, it was the *Overture in D* which appeared most often, with more than a dozen performances between 1906 and 1956, plus a commercial recording made in December 1953. This 1956 performance was given with Beecham's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Edinburgh International Festival in the Usher Hall on 23rd August in a programme which included Sir Thomas's own suite of pieces from Grétry's *Zémire et Azor*, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G* (Op. 58) with Robert Casadesus, and another Beecham favourite, the Balakirev *Symphony No. 1 in C*.

André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's opera *Zémire et Azor* of 1771 was one of the scores of French and Italian eighteenth century works (including those of Méhul, Cimarosa, Dalayrac, Boieldieu, Cherubini, Paisiello and Monsigny) which the young Beecham came across and collected on Continental travels in his student and early married years, especially in 1904 when he attended the Opéra Comique and heard Grétry's *Richard Cœur de Lion* for the first time. This led to him seeking out other works by the Belgian-born composer, eventually even conducting five performances of *Zémire et Azor* at the Bath Festival in May 1955 with a largely French cast. The designer was Oliver Messel and the producer Anthony Besch, while Sir Thomas had the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (leader Hugh Maguire) in the pit of the Theatre Royal. For this production Beecham had to do some careful editing

and arranging of the original material but it was the suite of pieces from the ballet music of this score which he selected and arranged which brought knowledge of the work to a wider public in the concert hall. Of this, the delicate and charming *Pantomime (Air de Ballet)* became an oft-played and much loved encore "Lollipop". As early as May 1906 Beecham introduced an item from *Zémire et Azor* in a programme and three years later the *Air de Ballet* was included. In December 1910 he conducted his Suite from the ballet music, the first of nearly twenty occasions it was to feature up to 1959, while the *Air de Ballet* alone had some twenty-five performances between 1909 and 1954 not including encores and commercial recordings.

Of Sir Thomas's four visits to the Edinburgh Festival, he performed this Suite on two of those occasions (1950 and 1956). In the concert on 22nd August 1950 – the first of four conducted by Beecham in Edinburgh that year – it shared an all-French programme with works by Méhul, Lalo, Poulenc and Delibes. This 1956 performance was in the same programme as the Boccherini *Overture* recorded here. Clearly enchanted by the *Air de Ballet*, with some lovely playing from the flute of Gerald Jackson and oboe of Terence MacDonagh, the Edinburgh audience broke out into premature applause, bringing mildly amused admonishment from Sir Thomas who was clearly enjoying the occasion.

Franz Liszt's *Die Loreley* seems to have appealed to Beecham in its orchestrated version because of its romantically dramatic symphonic poem nature, in the way that the Symphonic Poems *Orpheus* and *Tasso* did. Liszt set the Heine text for voice and piano first in 1841 and again in 1854-9, very effectively orchestrating it in 1860. Beecham seems to have had only five opportunities to perform this work, first in 1899, then in 1911 and 1912 before the performance preserved here from the St. Cecilia's Day concert on 22nd November 1954 in the Royal Festival Hall with his Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, led by Arthur Leavins and with Rosina Raisbeck as soloist. The concert was broadcast in the BBC Third Programme.

From the same programme comes this performance of César Franck's Symphonic Poem *Le Chasseur Maudit* of 1882, a work most favoured by Sir Thomas after this composer's *Symphony in d minor* out of the only five Franck pieces he chose to play between 1907 and 1959. It is largely thanks to his advocacy through more than fifty performances and three recordings between 1911 and 1959 that concert-goers were made aware of the stature of that work and the same may be said for *Le Chasseur Maudit* which Beecham gave some thirty times between 1915 and 1954 and recorded commercially in 1951 – a recording which brought paeans of praise from the critics at the time. In a work in which

horns play a prominent role, in 1951 Beecham had had the legendary Dennis Brain as principal, with his ever-faithful Ian Beers as number two while the important fourth horn part was played by Frank Probyn. For the 1954 concert performance both Beers and Probyn were still in place by Brain had gone to the Philharmonia Orchestra and his place as principal had been taken by Alan Civil. As Alan Jefferson said, Sir Thomas played this work *in a truly French manner, striking a chill to the listener with its dramatic, almost Gothic message*. Not only could he distil the essential French essence in all the French music upon which he lavished his loving care and enthusiasm but also in his day, stretching over sixty-one years of concert-giving and recording, he gave British audiences the opportunity to hear many such works for which even the French themselves had far fewer opportunities to enjoy. It is no surprise that, as early as 1937, in recognition of his great service to French music, Sir Thomas was made a *Commandeur* of the *Légion d'Honneur*.

The third item from that 1954 St. Cecilia's Day concert presented here is Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (Op. 36) in a programme that had opened with Wagner's *Overture: The Flying Dutchman* and closed with Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor* in which the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra was joined by the London Philharmonic Choir.

Beecham's relations with Elgar, though nothing like as close as those with Delius, were far closer and amicable than is usually understood. While Lady Elgar did not particularly like Sir Thomas, it is known that Sir Edward did not always take notice of his wife's opinions and – except for a few early disagreements and misunderstandings – Elgar held Beecham in high regard as a conductor and appreciated his performances of a number of his works which had not fared too well in the hands of other conductors. This continued after Elgar's death in 1934, notable in this connection eventually was Beecham's performance of the *Introduction and Allegro* (Op. 47) in November 1937 with the excellent string section of his London Philharmonic Orchestra, so demonstrating at last to audiences that it was the fine work its composer believed it to be, since it had suffered from lack of public interest and adequate performances since the beginning of the century. Elgar knew and identified with Beecham's performances of the *Overture: Cockaigne* (Op. 40) and the *Serenade for Strings* (Op. 20), Beecham conducting more than twenty of Elgar's works in over one hundred and sixty performances, including *The Dream of Gerontius* (Op. 38), both concertos and *Falstaff* (Op. 68), the last a work Elgar felt could have been written for Beecham. Except for the *Serenade for Strings*, it was *Cockaigne* and the *Enigma Variations* which received the greatest attention from Sir Thomas and it was the *Enigma Variations* which concerned the composer most in his last days. Beecham had played the work for the first time in November 1931 but was planning to include it more frequently in his programmes. At one

of the last meetings that Sir Thomas and Sir Edward had together, Elgar went through the score with Beecham and explained his ideas in the work. He told Sir Thomas that he was less than happy with his own recordings of the work, the first an acoustic recording from 1920-21 and the second an electrical recording from 1926. He asked Beecham to record the work in accordance with his wishes when Sir Thomas felt that recording techniques had sufficiently improved. The promise given then to do so was kept by Sir Thomas in November 1954 and his principal clarinet, Jack Brymer, remembered the unusual anguish that Beecham went through over the recording in his endeavour to achieve the best possible results and so honour his pledge to the composer. The performance recorded at the concert here was just four days before Sir Thomas took his orchestra into the studio to make that recording. He had with him his hand-picked team of Royal Philharmonic players, led by Arthur Leavins and the "Royal Family" of woodwind principals – Gerald Jackson (flute), Terence MacDonagh (oboe), Jack Brymer (clarinet) and Gwydion Brooke (bassoon), balanced by a formidable but most musical brass section, the horns led by Alan Civil, trumpets by Richard (Bob) Walton and trombones by Sydney Langston plus the tuba of Francis White. The timpani opening of Variation VII was in the hands of Lewis (Titch) Pocock while the important string solos of Variations VI and XII were taken by Frederick Riddle (viola) and John Kennedy (violoncello). The organ's important contribution to the finale was played by Denis Vaughan. In his unfinished autobiography *A Mingled Chime*, which goes up only as far as 1923, Beecham wrote favourably of Elgar, seeing his early works showing *an undeniable advance over anything produced by his English predecessors or contemporaries in the more orthodox forms such as the symphony and the oratorio*. His later thoughts we can discern from the quality of his surviving performances on record.

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