

GEORGE SZELL and the CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA
THE FORGOTTEN RECORDINGS

JS Bach (1685-1750) · Brahms (1833-97) · Mozart (1756-91)
Schumann (1810-56) · Smetana (1824-84)
R Strauss (1864-1949) · Stravinsky (1882-1971)

The Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell *conductor*

CD 1	1-5	JS Bach	Orchestral Suite No.3 in D major, BWV 1068 ^a	19:33
	6	Smetana	The Moldau (Vltava) from Má vlast ^a	11:37
	7	R Strauss	Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks ^a	13:49
	8-11	Mozart	Symphony No.39 in E flat, K543 ^b	24:42
			Total duration:	69:44

Recorded in the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland, Ohio on: ^aDecember 24, 1954 (mono);
^bOctober 19-21, 1955 (stereo)

CD 2	1	Brahms	Academic Festival Overture, Op.80	10:25
	2-11	Brahms	Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op.56a*	17:31
	12-15	Schumann	Symphony No.4 in D minor, Op.120	25:37
	16-22	Stravinsky	<i>The Firebird</i> Suite (1919 Version)	19:36
			Total duration:	73:13

From stereo recordings in the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland, Ohio, October 19-21, 1955

All FIRST RELEASES on CD except *

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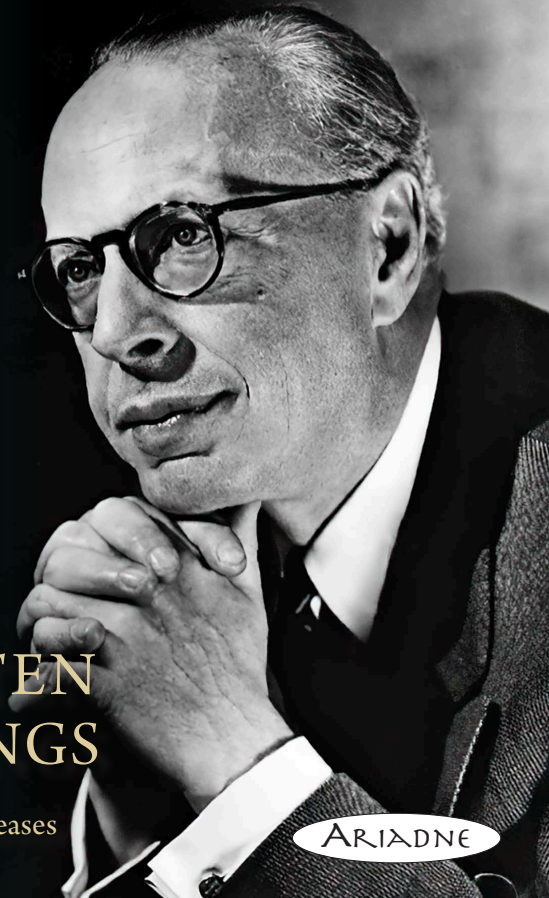
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SZELL
and the
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THE
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RECORDINGS

Includes Seven First Releases



The Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell *conductor*
 THE FORGOTTEN RECORDINGS

CD 1	JS Bach: Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068^a	[19:33]
1	Overture	6:19
2	Air	5:46
3	Gavotte I/II	3:19
4	Bourrée	1:20
5	Gigue	2:46
6	Smetana: The Moldau (Vltava) from Má vlast^a	11:37
7	R Strauss: Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks^a	13:49
	Mozart: Symphony No. 39 in E flat, K543^b	[24:42]
8	Adagio – Allegro	8:21
9	Andante con moto	8:32
10	Menuetto	3:49
11	Allegro	3:58
	Total duration:	69:44

Recorded in the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland, Ohio on:
^aDecember 24, 1954 (mono); ^bOctober 19-21, 1955 (stereo)

CD 2	1 Brahms: Academic Festival Overture, Op.80	10:25
	Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op.56a*	[17:31]
2	Thema – Chorale St. Antoni – Andante	2:00
3	Variation I: Poco più animato	1:19

4	Variation II: Più vivace	0:59
5	Variation III: Con moto	1:44
6	Variation IV: Andante con moto	2:04
7	Variation V: Vivace	0:57
8	Variation VI: Vivace	1:15
9	Variation VII: Grazioso	2:40
10	Variation VIII: Presto non troppo	0:54
11	Finale – Andante	3:34

	Schumann: Symphony No. 4 in D minor, Op.120	[25:37]
12	Ziemlich langsam-Lebhaft	8:48
13	Romanze: Ziemlich langsam	4:09
14	Scherzo: Lebhaft	5:01
15	Langsam – Lebhaft	7:38

	Stravinsky: The Firebird Suite (1919 Version)	[19:36]
16	Introduction	2:52
17	The Firebird and its Dance	0:14
18	Variation of the Firebird	1:14
19	Round of the Princesses	4:33
20	Infernal Dance of King Kastchei	4:13
21	Lullaby	3:28
22	Finale	2:59

Total duration: 73:13

From stereo recordings in the Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland, Ohio
 on October 19-21, 1955

All first releases on CD except *

George Szell was born György Endre Szél in Budapest on June 7, 1897. Musically precocious, he was taken out of school by his father in 1904 and sent to Vienna where he studied piano with Richard Robert (also the teacher of Rudolf Serkin and Clara Haskil) and later composition with Eusebius Mandyczewski, friend of Brahms, and also in Leipzig with Max Reger. At the age of 10 he made his public debut in Vienna playing Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major, K.488, with the orchestra playing several of his own compositions. Causing a sensation and hailed a "new Mozart", he embarked on a concert tour of London, Berlin, Dresden, Cologne, Hamburg and Leipzig. Even though his compositions were being played all over Europe, he ended his composing career at 23, saying in later years, "I wasn't good enough for my own standards".

Increasingly interested in conducting, he began studying the symphonic literature by playing it on the piano. His first opportunity to conduct came by happenstance when in 1913 he and his family were vacationing at Bad Kissingen. With the scheduled conductor of the Vienna Symphony indisposed, Szell, being known to the leader, was asked to take over the concert; it was a triumph. The 16-year-old now began appearing with first rank orchestras in triple billing as soloist-composer-conductor and was eventually noticed by Richard Strauss who appointed him to the staff of the Berlin State Opera. At the age of 20, on Strauss's recommendation, Szell was appointed conductor of the Strasbourg Municipal Theatre, but his tenure there was cut short by the French reclamation of Alsace-Lorraine as reparations from Germany following the Great War. His star was clearly on the ascendant. Posts now followed in Darmstadt, Dusseldorf,

and in 1924, as first conductor of the Berlin State Opera under Erich Kleiber and in 1929 as chief conductor of the New German Theatre in Prague.

His rising status in Europe also attracted attention in America where the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra put Szell's name on its short list, along with Vladimir Golschmann, for their vacant conductor's position. He made his debut there in 1930 at the age of 33. A return in 1931 did not result in the position being offered to him; instead it went to Golschmann.

With the worsening political situation in Europe, Szell decided to leave Prague for more stable climates in Glasgow (The Scottish Orchestra, now the Royal Scottish National Orchestra) and in The Hague (the Residentie Orchestra). This later post would prove to have a significant influence on his future American career. In 1937, before Szell arrived, Arturo Toscanini was engaged to conduct and found the condition of the orchestra so bad that he walked out of the first rehearsal. Saying it would destroy the orchestra, the president pleaded with Toscanini to reconsider and offered him all the rehearsals he would need. Relenting, Toscanini returned and even accepted an engagement for the next year. In the meantime, Szell had become permanent guest conductor and, in Szell's words, "some changes were made". When Toscanini returned in 1938 he was amazed at the improvement and asked (again in Szell's words): "What has happened? This is a different orchestra!" The president replied, "We now have Mr. Szell". Toscanini now invited Szell to conduct his own NBC Symphony Orchestra in New York in 1939, but Szell had to decline because of commitments in Australia.

However, in 1939, Szell unexpectedly found himself in North America again, having just concluded his engagements with the Australian Broadcasting Company. With the increasing world tension over the political situation in Europe, he and his wife Helene, who accompanied him, thought it risky to return to his Scottish Orchestra in Glasgow via the Atlantic and so booked a passage on the liner *Aorangi* to Vancouver, Canada. Also with him was his complete music library. He had taken it to Australia because, given the current world situation, he was not willing to take any chance of losing what he said “represented years of my life, entire summers given to the study of scores and the careful annotation of orchestral material”. Finding that the Scottish Orchestra, where he had been principal conductor since 1937, was a casualty of war, the Szells decided to wait out the conflict in the United States.

Once in New York he found himself in an unusual position: no conducting work. He took advantage of the time off to orchestrate Smetana’s String Quartet *From My Life*, and in addition he accepted teaching positions (in instrumentation, composition and advanced theory) at the Mannes School of Music and the New School for Social Research. Eventually conducting offers began to arrive and he accepted guest appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the NBC Symphony Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera.

Availing himself of the opportunity to hear all that New York musical life had to offer, he attended many concerts of local and visiting orchestras. One visitor in 1940 that particularly impressed him was the Cleveland Orchestra under Artur Rodziński. After the concert he remarked to his wife on the discipline

and cleanliness of their playing. In later years he recalled, “When I first came to Cleveland as a guest, I was aware of this tradition and made it a point to restore order and discipline as quickly as possible”.

Restoration was needed because in the years during the Second World War, events would conspire against the current conductor, Erich Leinsdorf, retaining his post. The Cleveland Orchestra’s musicians were being raided by Rodziński, now at the New York Philharmonic, and its ranks depleted due to the military draft. Even Leinsdorf could not escape the long arm of conscription. He was drafted into the US Army and sent to military music school in 1944. With a constant parade of guest conductors and thinned ranks, inevitably the orchestra’s standards declined.

With Leinsdorf’s contract containing an ‘out’ clause following each season, the Board of Directors now decided the time was right for new leadership, especially when guest conductors Vladimir Golschmann and George Szell both received rave reviews in the local press; Golschmann for his colourful and flamboyant performances and Szell for his “vitalizing, fervent and virtuosic leadership”. Even though reviews of Golschmann’s performances claimed “the whole orchestra, in fact, sounded better than it has for some time”, it was Szell’s all-Beethoven program in December, 1945 that left reviewer Herbert Elwell gushing, “[t]his was surely not the same orchestra we have been listening to all season”. Leinsdorf’s days were now numbered. The decision was made to pursue Szell even though his demands were extraordinary. Of course his demands would be met because the Board acknowledged that Szell had, as one *Cleveland Press* writer noted, “IT”.

Szell's first commercial recordings with the Cleveland Orchestra date from April 1947 and contain repertoire that would be central to his recorded legacy – a selection of Dvořák *Slavonic Dances* in new editions prepared by Szell, Beethoven Symphony No.4 and Mozart Symphony No.39, all for Columbia Records. But in the several years to follow there was increasing frustration from the Board of Directors at the lack of attention being paid to the orchestra by Columbia. With the orchestras of Philadelphia and New York making records by the dozens, Cleveland had “in Szell's nine years... recorded only 14 pieces”, according to a *Cleveland Press* writer.



During a rehearsal in the late 1940s

Szell was painfully aware that the pay scale for Cleveland Orchestra musicians was far below that paid by the orchestras of New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Orchestra president Thomas L Sidlo described it as “a first-rate orchestra... with a second-grade payroll”. In addition, there was no pension fund. This led to many musicians leaving for greener pastures elsewhere. In 1952-53 the winter season was only 30 weeks long and annual base compensation was just \$3,240, which the orchestra committee called “the borderline of poverty”. James Frankel of the

Cleveland Press wrote an article enumerating the wide variety of jobs to which players resorted to make ends meet; they included everything from drill press operator to running a Dairy Queen milk bar. One way to supplement the base pay of a player was through recordings.

Trying to generate interest at Columbia, orchestra manager Carl Vosburgh proposed to them a recording of Szell as piano soloist with the orchestra. Szell had just performed the Mozart Piano Concerto in A major, K.448 with the orchestra and Vosburgh considered it “certainly... one of the high spots of the orchestra in the 34-year history”. The response from Columbia was that it would be prohibitively expensive because the entire orchestra would have to be paid, even if they were not involved in the sessions. Frustrated, Vosburgh wrote to Szell saying, “I think our treatment by Columbia has been lousy, stinking and I could go on and on”.

Eventually Columbia made arrangements with its lower-priced subsidiary label, Epic, to record the orchestra. Up until this arrangement the orchestra had, on several occasions, been called the ‘Columbia Symphony Orchestra’, a name reserved, for contractual reasons, for pick-up orchestras in New York and elsewhere. Now with an exclusive contract the orchestra could be called by its real name. The first recordings for Epic were of two Haydn Symphonies, Nos.88 and 104, on April 9, 1954 in Cleveland's Masonic Auditorium, the preferred location to record until the dry Severance Hall acoustic was dramatically improved in 1958. Szell, ever the micro-manager, was involved at every stage of the design and construction, including paint colours which included comments directed at his



Cleveland's Masonic Auditorium where these recordings were made

orchestra manager, "Please make sure... to change the ghastly blue paint which William McKelvy Shithead Martin put in... to [match] the rest of the auditorium".

We now come to the works included in this set; the 'Forgotten' recordings. In 1954 Szell was approached by the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC), a nationwide mail order house dealing in popular books sold by subscription and which was now branching out to offer classical LPs on the same subscription basis. Each LP was accompanied by a performance of a work and, either on the flip side or on

a separate 10" LP, an analysis of the works in question by noted music lecturers Thomas Scherman and Deems Taylor. The price for these LPs to club members in 1955 was \$3.60. The BOMC advertised in many of the major popular American magazines of the day, such as *Popular Science*, *Life*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire* and *Harper's Magazine*. Typical advertisements named some of the artists and repertory available for purchase with quotes by leading writers and artists of the day. Bennett Cerf, co-founder of the publishing firm Random House and a popular TV panellist, is quoted in one ad saying, "In a few minutes Music-Appreciation Records taught me more about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony than I learned in a month in a course at college!" Jarmila Novotná, Metropolitan Opera star, said, "Music has been my whole life – but not until I heard my first Music-Appreciation Record did I realize how much I had been missing when I listened to orchestral music".

Many of these offerings were licensed from other labels, such as Vanguard, Vox and Decca, but many were newly recorded by such conductors as Max Rudolf, Alfred Wallenstein, Fritz Stiedry, Alexander Smallens, Leonard Bernstein and George Szell. Due to contractual restrictions the orchestras involved assumed pseudonyms, such as Stadium Concerts Symphony Orchestra (in some cases the New York Philharmonic) and the Music Appreciation Symphony Orchestra, which in our case is the Cleveland Orchestra.

To help supplement his musicians' income, Szell was happy to accept this overture from the BOMC to record for them. In a November 22, 1954 letter to Board president Percy Brown, Szell says that BOMC wanted these records to be

made with the New York Philharmonic, but that he (Szell) “told them that I would rather make them with members of our Orchestra and managed to get their agreement to this idea, although it is less convenient and more costly to them. I did this not only because I prefer to work with members of our Orchestra, but also because I was eager for them to get some extra income, particularly in the present unfortunate situation, where no recording income whatsoever is assured for them as yet”.

The first session took place in the Masonic Auditorium on December 24, 1954. The works recorded were Bach’s Third Orchestral Suite in D major (BWV 1068), Smetana’s *The Moldau* and Richard Strauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel*. Typically, these had been performed recently in subscription concerts; the Bach on December 23, *The Moldau* on December 18 and *Till Eulenspiegel* on November 11.

It is interesting to hear Szell conduct a work by a composer with whom he is not usually associated: JS Bach, although he conducted Bach’s violin concerti previously for Columbia. Historically informed performance practice in 1954 was still in its infancy, but here is Szell using a reduced orchestra and very audible harpsichord continuo, in addition to double-dotting in the Overture and fleet tempi in the dance movements. The Air, too, unusually for this time, is not taken at the lugubrious tempo so often heard in big romantic orchestral settings. Recording all three of these works in one day undoubtedly caused some things to be overlooked. In the Bach we can hear some uncharacteristic ensemble lapses, something that would not have been left uncorrected with more time available. Also in the Strauss there is brass playing that is in marked contrast to the same

piece recorded for Epic less than two years later. Of special interest in *Till Eulenspiegel* is one of the first appearances on record of the new third horn and future legendary principal, Myron Bloom. He can be heard in the third horn solo at 8:45 of track 7 on CD1. In 1955 Bloom was elevated to the principal horn chair and can be heard in that capacity in the following recordings.



On October 19, 20 and 21, 1955, the orchestra recorded five more works for BOMC. This time, not in the prevalent monophonic format but in new stereophonic sound, one of a small group of American orchestras to do so commercially that year. Here we have Brahms’ *Academic Festival Overture* and *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Mozart’s *Symphony No.39 in E flat*, Schumann’s *Symphony No.4 in D Minor* and Stravinsky’s *The Firebird Suite* (1919).

Comparing these recordings with versions that would come later, one is particularly struck by the poetic nature of the Schumann symphony and its propulsive drive in the last movement. In the Mozart, a composer who is central to Szell’s repertoire, the relaxed pace gives the music time to breathe but is, nonetheless, meticulously phrased. The Stravinsky *Firebird* is maybe the best of the lot. Beautifully recorded, it crackles with energy.

One of the demands that Szell made to the Cleveland Board of Directors was that, when he decided the orchestra was ready, they would tour Europe. The first tour in May-June 1957 was a triumph. When they returned home, Szell recorded these words: "Many times... I was told, 'This is the most European of all American orchestras'... It means that European audiences recognize our orchestra as not only a superb instrument, but as an artistic personality of its own, with a heart and a soul. My aim in developing the Cleveland Orchestra has been to combine the finest virtues of the great European orchestras of pre-World War II times with the most distinguished qualities of our leading American orchestras... [to] put the American orchestra's technical perfection, beauty of sound and adaptability... into the service of warm-hearted, spontaneous music making in the best European tradition.

"We try," he added, "to cultivate, with utmost care, every detail; we attempt to achieve the ultimate eloquence in phrasing and articulation on the part of every section and of every player... This, of course, can be accomplished only by musicians who have been selected over many years, not only because of their individual excellence, but with a view to their matching characteristics, without which completely integrated ensemble performance is unthinkable. It has been said that the Cleveland Orchestra performs like an exquisite string quartet, which, in itself, is high praise. But I derive the greatest satisfaction from the words of an outstanding contemporary musician who said to me, 'This orchestra plays like a very great soloist.'"

At the time of this tour, all of Szell's outstanding solo winds and strings would be in place. Recordings from this period and into the early 1960s show an ensemble

of breathtaking virtuosity and unanimity, with an aura of controlled exuberance and youthful muscularity. Of course, some section personnel occasionally changed and when a new member came on board, Szell would pay particular attention to their playing and sometimes ride them unmercifully. If they could survive this trial by fire – and some did not – he would then leave them alone. He knew he could trust them. This trial could extend to new soloists as well. Dame Janet Baker, the peerless English mezzo-soprano, tells the story of her US debut with Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra in performances of the Verdi Requiem in 1968. At one point, she said, Szell gave her a wrong cue for an entrance. She immediately knew what he was doing and didn't take the bait. The next night the same thing happened at exactly the same spot and with the same results. After that, she said, he left her alone. She had passed his devious test. Not only could Szell be intimidating, but the orchestra as well when viewed from the perspective of the first-time guest conductor, one of whom described it as "a frightening experience – you feel that you're facing a hundred little Szells".

Despite the fear factor that could emanate from the podium, many players knew they were creating something extraordinary, as Irving Kolodin of *Saturday Review* said in 1962: "They are good and they know they are good". One violinist remarked, "Even when we have disputes and are not happy, we play well for Szell. We do it out of respect for him, and perhaps out of fear".

In such an atmosphere, one can imagine that rehearsals were pressure-packed affairs, which in fact they were. Szell said that they did their best work in rehearsal and start to rehearse where most orchestras leave off, performing seven concerts

a week, with the public invited to the last two. Remarkably, levity did, on very rare occasions, put in an appearance. John Mack, principal oboist from 1965 to 2001, recounts an episode at one rehearsal when Szell said, "I want this phrase to sound completely spontaneous – however, as a result of meticulous planning". The orchestra roared with laughter. As hard a taskmaster as he could be, Szell never threw Toscanini-like tantrums in rehearsal. A withering glance through his thick "Dr. Cyclops" glasses was more than enough to wilt any player; "a cold, cold sonofabitch", said one young conducting pupil. Lost in all this are occasional stories of quiet acts of kindness to players who were dealing with emotional or financial distress.

Many thought that when Szell took the Cleveland position it was merely a stepping-stone towards the New York Philharmonic, as it had been for Rodziński, or to Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra where he was a frequent guest conductor. (It is questionable how welcoming this orchestra would have been to such news. The musicians there called rehearsal with Szell "*Szell-straat*", a pun on the Dutch word *celstraf*, meaning "solitary confinement".) But Szell knew that the total control he had in Cleveland would not be replicated anywhere else. In 1955 he finally bought a house (next door to the house where Leinsdorf had lived) in the Shaker Heights section of Cleveland and said, "Cleveland is my home". Even so, he never relinquished his ties to the New York Philharmonic, with which he had begun recording for Columbia Records in 1950. His association with the Philharmonic continued until his death.

From the mid-1960s until his death, the orchestra under Szell acquired a more mature, burnished sound, but still with the unparalleled clarity and unanimity

of phrasing and execution. Toward the end of his life Szell concentrated more and more on the repertoire which he viewed as central to his musical life and work, and in which he felt an obligation to pass on the traditions in which he was trained. After Szell's death on July 30, 1970, Myron Bloom, the orchestra's great principal horn, remarked that Szell was "the last of the great aristocrats among conductors".

We now come to an enigma surrounding these recordings – which company recorded them? There are a few clues but mostly they point to who *didn't* record them. There are matrix numbers on one of the monaural discs that indicate a custom Columbia pressing and on another that indicates a custom RCA pressing. Other numbers are from independent pressing plants. Of course, this only indicates who pressed them and *not* who recorded them. Another data point is that the Columbia team was in New York on December 24, 1954. And what of these genuine stereo recordings? There were few companies recording in stereo in 1955; RCA, Mercury and Vanguard, primarily. But would RCA have been hired to record a group under contract to a rival label? It has been suggested that Herbert Heller, an engineer at the Clevite Corporation in Cleveland could have been involved. He had designed and built a custom three-track stereo tape deck and had been hired by the Institute of Radio Engineers to make some of the first stereo recordings in the US. With the approval of the orchestra and the musicians' union he used this machine to experimentally record the orchestra in concert from microphones hanging permanently on the stage. Szell, being interested in this new technology, would audition these tapes after the concert and the next day would critique the players based on what he had heard. The orchestra

eventually tired of this increased scrutiny and withdrew their permission for the recordings to be made. These tapes have survived and some were approved for release on CD in the Cleveland Orchestra George Szell Centennial Edition.

Since the orchestra's Board of Directors was not involved with this venture, neither they, nor the orchestra, have any records of the details of the recording sessions. Also, since the BOMC has changed hands many times in the interim, this company has no records either. At this remove, this question will probably remain unanswered. Those who were there are not with us now and when I had a chance to ask them the subject was not on my radar.

In 2021, these LPs are very rare and known only to collectors. In a world where Szell has had much of his oeuvre reissued time and time again, and finally in a massive brick-like 'complete' edition, the neglect of these recordings further warrants their description as 'Forgotten'. With this first CD release, save one (the Brahms Haydn Variations), of these Book-of-the-Month Club recordings, we can say that Szell's complete Cleveland Orchestra recordings are now available.

All these works, with the exception of the Bach Third Suite, would be recorded again in coming years for Epic or Columbia, but here we can appreciate that the orchestra was well on its way to becoming, in Szell's words, "this glorious instrument... that perfectly reflects my musical ideals".

Lani Spahr © 2021

I would like to offer my thanks to Stuart Friedman of Cleveland, Ohio,
for the loan to me of his Music Appreciation LPs for this project.

