

Thomas BEECHAM
conducts SIBELIUS

ARIADNE 5013

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra 75th Anniversary Issue

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Symphony No.1 in E minor, Op.39^a [37:38]

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| 1 | I. Andante ma non troppo – Allegro-energico | 10:38 |
| 2 | II. Andante (ma non troppo lento) | 9:16 |
| 3 | III. Scherzo (Allegro) | 5:33 |
| 4 | IV. Finale (Quasi una fantasia – Andante – Allegro molto) | 12:09 |

Scènes historiques II, Op.66^b

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 5 | Minnelaulu (Memory Song) | 4:44 |
| 6 | Nostosillalla (On the Drawbridge) | 5:20 |
| 7 | Playing for Beecham ^c | 29:56 |

RPO Beecham-era musicians John Underwood (*viola*) and
Raymond Ovens (*second violin*) in conversation with Jon Tolansky

Total duration: 78:00^a Usher Hall Edinburgh, on August 17, 1952 © Music Preserved^b People's Palace Theatre, London, on April 17, 1947^c Broadstairs, Kent, on January 6, 2015 (DDD)

^{ab} **Audio Restoration:** Lani Spahr ^c **Executive Producer:** Jon Tolansky
Front cover: Photo taken at Ainola, Sibelius's home in Järvenpää, in June 1954
Design: Andrew Giles **Booklet Editor:** Michael Quinn

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75th Anniversary Issue

First CD release

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Foreword

John Lucas, author of *Thomas Beecham: An Obsession with Music*, introduces these live recordings of works by Sibelius marking the 75th anniversary of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's first concert, which Sir Thomas – its founder – conducted in September 1946.

Although I was fortunate enough to attend many of Beecham's concerts in his later years, I only heard him conduct Sibelius's First Symphony once, at the Royal Festival Hall, London, with the RPO in 1958. I bought the LP he had made of it, but to my ears it lacked the spontaneity and sheer intensity of the live performance. Why, I wondered, was that? Twenty-one years later I got the answer with the publication of Michael Gray's Beecham Discography, which revealed that the recording had been made over a span of 12 months, allowing Beecham to substitute second and perhaps even third thoughts in certain passages, thus affecting the overall coherence of the piece.

Now, a further 42 years later, SOMM Recordings releases the only known live recording of Beecham conducting Sibelius's First Symphony – a spine-tingling performance he gave with the RPO at the 1952 Edinburgh Festival. The sound is remarkably clear. The orchestra is packed with Beecham regulars, including its celebrated "royal family" of wind players – Gerald Jackson (flute), Terence MacDonagh (oboe), Jack Brymer (clarinet) and Gwydion Brooke (bassoon) – with Dennis Brain leading the horns and Richard

('Bob') Walton as first trumpet. Mention too must be made of Lewis Pocock, the RPO's Principal Percussionist from 1947, who here makes his debut as the orchestra's new timpanist. Too often in this symphony the timpanist, who plays a vital part from the eleventh bar to the work's very last one, is reined in by the conductor, perhaps for fear of upsetting the balance. Here Beecham gives Pocock his head and the result is highly dramatic.

The recording was donated to what is now called Music Preserved, whose collection of historic recordings is housed at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York. The two items that follow on from the symphony have come from the collection of Jon Tolansky: first, a previously unissued live recording from 1947 of two of the composer's *Scènes historiques*, and, secondly, an enjoyable interview he made with two RPO stalwarts, who share their memories of playing for Beecham.

This is not the first invaluable live recording of Beecham performances that SOMM has issued. Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, Busoni's Piano Concerto and d'Indy's *La forêt enchantée* are just three that spring to mind, not to mention the first-ever live recording of a Beecham/RPO concert, made at the now long-gone Davis Theatre, Croydon, on November 10, 1946, which included Schumann's Piano Concerto with Moura Lympany as soloist. I hope there will be many more to come.

Thomas Beecham: An Obsession with Music
is published by The Boydell Press.

Sir Thomas Beecham and Jean Sibelius

An Act of Devotion

“With Sibelius, I have lost a friend of 50 years... I have always passionately loved his music.”

The New York Times carried those words by the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham in its edition of September 13, 1957: the great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius had died three days earlier. Beecham’s devoted advocacy of his long-time friend’s music during the later part of his career is logged in characteristically scholarly detail by the late Graham Melville-Mason in his invaluable booklet essay for SOMM’s release of Beecham conducting the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies (SOMM-BEECHAM 18) where he quotes Sibelius’s letter to Sir Thomas on the occasion of his 70th birthday: “I highly appreciate your deep understanding and brilliant interpretation of my compositions, which has been of great importance to me”.

Some years earlier, in December 1934, the producer Walter Legge, later to found the Philharmonia Orchestra and become EMI’s Head of Artists and Repertoire, had, in an article for the *Daily Telegraph*, reported Sibelius saying to him: “Of the men who play my music today, and whose performances I have heard, I prefer Beecham and [Serge] Koussevitsky”¹.

¹ *Walter Legge 1906-1979: Words and Music*, ed. Alan Sanders (Duckworth, 1998), p.74

He added: “Beecham’s performances have come to me by wireless and they are superb. He is a remarkable man. It gives me the deepest pleasure and satisfaction to see how great an interest he takes in my music and to know that it is he who is playing so much of my music to the British public”.²

For the last 25 years of his life Sibelius had strong reason to appreciate Beecham’s ardent proselytizing of his symphonies when their popularity was nowhere as widespread as is the case today. Melville-Mason notes over 275 performances by Beecham between 1931 and 1960 that included the performance of the Symphony No.1 appearing here for the first time on disc. It was given in the opening concert of the 1952 Edinburgh International Festival at the city’s Usher Hall on August 17 as the concert’s last item – before the interval the audience had heard Beecham lead the RPO in Sibelius’s Seventh Symphony and some of his incidental music for Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

Three months earlier, Beecham had finally completed his commercial recording of Sibelius’s First Symphony, in Abbey Road Studios, to his satisfaction – nearly a year after he had begun the task. There had been six sessions, spread across May, November and December 1951, and May 1952: at least twice the number normally expected for a ‘standard’ work of this duration. This was not untypical for Beecham, who often insisted on additional repeat sessions after the allocated ones had failed to satisfy his demanding standards. In many instances, recordings were never approved by him.

² *Ibid.* p.74

Beecham was seeking, often to his producers' exasperation, the perfection of minutiae that, as he once himself confessed, were mercilessly exposed by the microphone. In a re-take session for parts of Haydn's 99th Symphony in Abbey Road in May 1959 he can be heard saying:

"I'm going to do some bits, about eight or nine pieces: those bits constitute the sections of the work in which there are some temporary lapses in respect of balance or execution and that sort of thing, and of course faults in the conducting line as well. Some of these would be heard on the gramophone, and then you would see what's the matter – they wouldn't be noticeable of course in the concert room: nothing ever is fortunately! But on this accursed gramophone record, you see, everything is stark naked and cold".

During the studio playbacks of Sibelius's First Symphony, the curse worked its spell with stark naked effrontery, Beecham ordering multiple repeats of many passages through those arduous sessions that eventually resulted in a finished disc to his satisfaction. When one considers that many of his studio recordings were put together in this stringently calibrated way, it is remarkable how much of Beecham's verve and artistry was captured. If the discs he did approve for release serve as exemplars of his perfectionism, it is fair to say that only rarely did they preserve the signature explosive panache and electrifying virtuosity that thrilled, and indeed often amazed, his concert audiences, not to mention the spellbinding signature extremes of *pianissimo*

diminuendos that could endlessly dissolve into the ether, leaving listeners marvelling that the RPO could fine the sound down so effortlessly without ever losing tone.

One of Beecham's handpicked Royal Philharmonic players, the Sub-Principal Viola John Underwood, is still with us to celebrate the 75th anniversary of this great orchestra. On this disc he pays personal tribute to the orchestra and its founder and is heard alongside the late Raymond Ovens, the Sub-Principal Second Violin under Beecham. In a conversation with me recorded in 2015, included here as the bonus track, *Playing for Beecham*, they reminisce about those halcyon days.

It includes extracts from performances in the SOMM catalogue: the Finale from Beecham's arrangement of ballet music from Grétry's *Zémire et Azor*, Delius's *Evening Voices*, Berlioz's Overture *Le Corsaire*, the Overture to Haydn's *The Seasons*, and Grieg's *Old Norwegian Romance with Variations*.

Both Underwood (a founding member of the Delmé Quartet) and Ovens (who later led the Philharmonia, English National Opera and Scottish Opera orchestras) testify to Beecham's individualistic approach to rehearsal, his prior and painstaking insertion of phrase marks in orchestral parts immediately forging a special unanimity of ensemble and style, ensuring that relatively little technical rehearsing was necessary. Unlike his peers George Szell and Yevgeny Mravinsky, who both slavishly rehearsed in microscopic detail, Beecham felt he could achieve perfection in his own

very different way – sometimes adding further markings before a concert for yet greater refinement or still tighter attack.

It is not always appreciated that the outstandingly fine intonation in so many Beecham performances and recordings resulted from his fastidious ear for balance and intonation, the two far more inter-related than is sometimes understood.

It inspired the RPO's celebrated "royal family" of woodwind players to surpass even their own high standards of intonation, achieving an immaculate level of perfection with an eloquence and expressiveness that no other conductor could coax from them.

In *Playing for Beecham*, Underwood also importantly tells us that, contrary to what is still erroneously stated, Beecham's conducting technique was crystal clear and communicative. As Ovens points out, he was not a conventional or predictable time-beater, but – as can be seen in the few films that exist of him conducting – his contact with the players, his shaping of details and pointing of nuances, and his auteur-like control of proceedings were grippingly conspicuous.

On the single occasion that I saw Beecham conduct, at London's Royal Festival Hall on April 24, 1960, I was only a boy three months short of his 12th birthday. Yet, I was a sufficiently au-fait and experienced concert-goer, thanks to my wonderful parents taking me to concerts and operas, to be struck by how different – and how much more compelling – this

conductor was than any I had previously seen or heard. I was far too young and immature to appreciate the full picture, of course, but I can echo the observation by John Lucas, that "He could wind up an audience to a pitch of excitement that I have rarely come across since". One knew that one was in the presence of an extraordinary influence.

The other bonus item comes from an unknown source. I found it in a long defunct haunt for enthusiasts called *The Gramophone Exchange* about 45 years ago. A 78rpm acetate disc, it looked as though it might have been part of a set as the music it contained was not complete – but it was for sale as an orphaned single disc. On April 17, 1947 the disc's anonymous maker had recorded two short items from a BBC Third Programme transmission with Beecham conducting the RPO. The concert, given in the People's Palace Theatre in East London (today the Great Hall of Queen Mary's University), consisted of Haydn's Symphony No.102, two of Sibelius's Op.66 *Scènes historiques*, Delius's Violin Concerto with Jean Pougnet the soloist, and, post-interval, Saint-Saëns' Symphony No.3.

The acetate preserves the two *Scènes historiques*: 'Minnelaulu' (Memory Song) is recorded in its entirety (just!), but only about 80 per cent of 'Nostosillalla' (On the Drawbridge) exists – five minutes was the maximum recordable duration possible per 78rpm side. 'Nostosillalla', however, is included here since this is the only known recording of the piece. Beecham connoisseurs who know his studio recording of *Scènes historiques* made in 1950 and 1952 will surely find it interesting.

Albeit small but striking, there are some noticeable differences in rhythmic phrasing and pointing. The RPO was only six months old at this time, and Beecham was in the process of making changes. Although the opening concert on September 15, 1946 had created a favourable impression with the public, Beecham was not satisfied and in the ensuing year made quite a number of replacements with some players leaving of their own accord. Despite the churn of players, to my ears the quality of performance in these extracts is truly outstanding. Much of the credit for the strings can go to the gentleman who was leading on this occasion: David McCallum, one of Beecham's favourite concert-masters, having previously held the post for him with the London Philharmonic Orchestra from 1936 to 1939.

Credit for what we hear in the transfer must go to Lani Spahr for so expertly rescuing an acetate disc with many technical challenges. He has also restored the recording of the First Symphony – a performance best viewed within the historical light of Beecham's scrupulous concern for fidelity to a composer's wishes.

Jon Tolansky © 2021

Jon Tolansky is a producer of audio documentaries on classical musicians.

SOMM Recordings would like to thank Music Preserved for making available this historic recording of Sibelius's Symphony No.1

Music Preserved, based at the Borthwick Institute archive at the University of York, is a registered charity dedicated to conserving rare, live music performances and making them accessible to a wide audience through partnerships with music colleges and cultural institutions. A selection of these recordings, dating from the 1930s to the 1960s, can be downloaded at modest cost on the online label *mpLIVE*. Among important collections donated to Music Preserved is that of the late Earl of Harewood, which includes live recordings of the premieres of operas by Britten, Gerhard and Walton. Further information can be found at: www.musicpreserved.org.uk