

SOMM
RECORDINGS



**THE BEECHAM
COLLECTION**

Live recordings



RICHARD STRAUSS

Ein Heldenleben

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No.8

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Sir Thomas Beecham

BEECHAM CONDUCTS R. STRAUSS AND BEETHOVEN

“Sensibility deepened by experience”: Beecham’s 1956 *Heldenleben*

Richard Strauss was greatly impressed by Beecham’s conducting of the British premiere of *Elektra* in 1910, and the two of them maintained friendly relations for the rest of Strauss’s life. As early as 1913, Strauss told Beecham that “what you have done for my works in England cannot be sufficiently appreciated” – a reflection of Beecham’s determined efforts to put Strauss’s operas on the London stage. Alongside the operas, Beecham was just as enthusiastic about some of Strauss’s tone poems, in particular *Ein Heldenleben*, which became something of a calling-card for him. He made a studio recording in 1947 with the recently established Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, following a performance at the London Strauss Festival attended by the composer. When the record came out a few months later, Richard Capell wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* that it would “go to the ends of the earth and will suggest – a little too flatteringly perhaps – that London in 1948 is the home of the finest possible orchestral playing”; he added that the performance itself was “beautiful”. *Gramophone* was just as wholehearted, hailing a “glorious recording”. In 1958, Beecham made a stereo recording which was released a few weeks after the conductor’s death in 1961. Though it was in much better sound, this second recording has always felt a little subdued by comparison with its predecessor, the reading never quite taking wing.

But this live performance from 1956 most certainly does. From the very start, the pacing has a kind of symphonic urgency, and in moments of repose there’s a concentrated intensity to the playing which is captivating. While the vagaries of live recording from the 1950s inevitably mean that there are some odd balances (the horns surely sounded more forward in the hall than they do in places here), this recording is a splendid opportunity to hear Beecham conducting a live performance of one of his favourite works – generating a *frisson*

that was seldom achievable in the studio – and with his own orchestra at the top of its form. In general, Beecham feels swifter than some of his rivals – he’s certainly lighter on his feet – and he brings an unusually strong flair for the work’s drama (for instance in the battle scene) and its poetic tenderness (in the love music and the epilogue).

The performance featured on an all-Strauss concert given at the Royal Festival Hall on 17 October 1956. The first half of the programme (*Macbeth*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and the *Dance of the Seven Veils*) has previously been issued on SOMM Recordings (ARIADNE 5021); the second half was devoted to *Ein Heldenleben*. It’s worth noting some of the reactions of critics at the time. In the *Daily Telegraph*, John Warrack praised a “performance of superb stature: the battle raged bravely, the adversaries spat and sneered viciously, and the epilogue was played with such tenderness as to bring tears to the eyes”. A long review by Neville Cardus in the *Guardian* noted that “a packed audience gave Sir Thomas Beecham and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra the kind of stormy, uninhibited ovation which in this country is usually restricted to matters of national importance. The applause and demonstration were caused by a superb performance of *Ein Heldenleben*.” Cardus also described the evolution of Beecham’s approach to the work:

Strauss himself expressed the opinion that Sir Thomas interpreted *Heldenleben* as finely as could be wished. That was years ago, and now, in his late 70s, Sir Thomas excels past performances ... because he has surrendered spectacular presentation, and in its place has come mellowness, affection, proportion ... He now opens the introduction with power in reserve, treating it as much as an exposition as a cliff-scaling picture of “Der Held”. A matured and truly musical feature of the performance was the rounded and thoroughly controlled treatment of the battle-piece, which was unfolded as a development section of close thematic connection and germination ... The closing chords of the work, beautifully intoned, were noble and nothing less. And this is how Strauss can sound when conducted with musical sensibility deepened by experience.

Listening more than half a century later, Cardus's account of this performance seems uncannily perceptive. Cardus also praised the violin solos of Arthur Leavins, though others found these a little bland: the unnamed critic in *The Times* described Leavins's "fairly tame portrait of the excitable Mrs Strauss", while showering praise on the orchestra more generally and admiring Beecham's conception, which "explored the richness of the tapestry, and unfolded the grandeur of the whole conception".

It's not just the virtuoso quality of the playing that stands out here, but also the character that Beecham coaxes from his woodwind soloists and the collective warmth of the RPO's sound. Not only can we hear Beecham at his best in this performance but also the RPO: a veritable orchestra of generals at this time. To encounter Beecham and his players at full stretch in a performance like this is a thrilling reminder of what an outstanding musical partnership they were at their finest.

Beecham's Beethoven

Beecham had an ambivalent relationship with Beethoven, and though he performed several of the symphonies regularly, they formed only a small part of his recorded legacy. During his lifetime, the critical consensus was that Beecham excelled in the even-numbered symphonies and that his combination of elegance and briskness was an approach that yielded dividends in these works. Those qualities are particularly apparent in the exciting, fleet-footed Eighth Symphony recorded at the Festival Hall on 12 December 1956 – as the first part of a concert which was followed after the interval with a performance of the Ninth (a work about which Beecham had decidedly mixed feelings). There's so much to relish in this live account of the Eighth, starting with Beecham's bracing and animated tempo for the first movement, which swings along with barely suppressed jubilation, working towards a

splendid climax that is never overblown. The middle movements are both fine, particularly the minuet which has several moments of extraordinary charm, thanks to the care Beecham and his players take over phrasing and balance. The start of the finale is tremendous: crackling with energy, the rhythms beautifully articulated by the RPO's strings, and the overall effect is most exhilarating. Beecham may have been an inconstant (and inconsistent) Beethovenian, but in the pieces for which he had the greatest sympathy, he could deliver interpretations as imaginative and effective as any of his contemporaries, and this Eighth is a shining example of that. Comparing the performances of the two symphonies in the 1956 concert, John Warrack in *Daily Telegraph* said of Beecham that "plainly he was more in sympathy with the Eighth, upon which he lavished his most delicate phrasing". To this we should, I think, add that he also brings a kind of bristling symphonic energy and a tangible sense of fun, which is often missing from more poker-faced readings, but which surely has a place in this wittiest of the Beethoven symphonies.

Beecham gave the Eighth Symphony on many occasions, and there are at least two earlier performances on record: an account with the Seattle Symphony from 1943 which has a few rough edges but plenty of verve; and a studio recording made with the RPO in November 1951 about which the authors of *The Record Guide* wrote in 1955: "It would be hard to imagine a more graceful or spirited performance of this work ... the tempi are just right, the balance is admirable". Malcolm Macdonald in the *Gramophone* (June 1953) was even more enthusiastic, declaring that: "you cannot play a Beethoven symphony better than this: nobody does, nobody has done, and I don't believe that anybody ever will. The delicacy, the fire, the phrasing, the balance: all are unsurpassable." That may be overstating the case, but this 1956 concert performance evokes similar feelings of genuine euphoria – as fresh and vital an account of the Eighth Symphony as one could hope to hear.



LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* (“There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – ‘historic’ – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This set is both.”), BBC Radio 3, *BBC Music Magazine*, *Fanfare*, *The Sunday Times*, MusicWeb International, *Diapason*, Classical Source, *International Record Review*, and many others.

In 2016, BBC Radio 3 presented an hour-long documentary about his stereo reconstructions for *Elgar Remastered* (SOMMCD 261-4). In addition to his close collaboration with SOMM, which has produced several critically acclaimed recordings, his work can be heard on Music & Arts, West Hill Radio Archive, Naxos, Boston Records, and Oboe Classics, and he has worked for Sony/France on historic restorations of the recordings of George Szell. In 2020, he was awarded an Honorary Membership of the Elgar Society for his work on the recorded legacy of Sir Edward Elgar.

Formerly a leading performer on period oboes in the US, he was a member of Boston Baroque and the Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra of Boston. In addition, he has appeared with many of North America’s leading period instrument orchestras, including Tafelmusik, Philharmonia Baroque, Tempesta di Mare, Apollo’s Fire, Washington Bach Consort, the American Classical Orchestra, Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra, Mercury Baroque, and many others.

Also a modern oboist, he was the principal oboist of the Colorado Springs Symphony Orchestra, the Colorado Opera Festival, the American Chamber Winds, and the Maine Chamber Ensemble and made his European solo debut in 1999 playing John McCabe's Oboe Concerto with the Hitchin Symphony Orchestra in England.

He has served on the faculties of Colorado College, Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire), and the University of New Hampshire Chamber Music Institute. He has toured throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East on period and modern oboes and has recorded for Telarc, Linn, Koch, Naxos, Vox, MusicMasters, L'Oiseau-Lyre, and Musica Omnia.

THE BEECHAM COLLECTION

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Conductor: Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., C.H.

SOMM-BEECHAM 33



Ludwig van Beethoven 1770–1827

Symphony No.8 in F Major, Op.93 ^a

[25:31]

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------|
| ① | I. Allegro vivace e con brio | 9:04 |
| ② | II. Allegretto scherzando | 3:52 |
| ③ | III. Tempo di minuetto | 4:58 |
| ④ | IV. Allegro vivace | 7:29 |

Richard Strauss 1864–1949

Ein Heldenleben, TrV 190 (Op.40) ^b

[42:24]

Leader and Violin Soloist: Arthur Leavins

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| ⑤ | "Der Held" (The Hero) | 4:09 |
| ⑥ | "Des Helden Widersacher" (The Hero's Adversaries) | 2:58 |
| ⑦ | "Des Helden Gefährtin" (The Hero's Companion) | 12:38 |
| ⑧ | "Des Helden Walstatt" (The Hero at Battle) | 8:43 |
| ⑨ | "Des Helden Friedenswerke" (The Hero's Works of Peace) | 7:31 |
| ⑩ | "Des Helden Weltflucht und Vollendung" | |
| | (The Hero's Retirement from this World and Completion) | 6:22 |

Total duration:

67:56

Recording (Live): Royal Festival Hall, ^b 17 October & ^a 12 December 1956

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