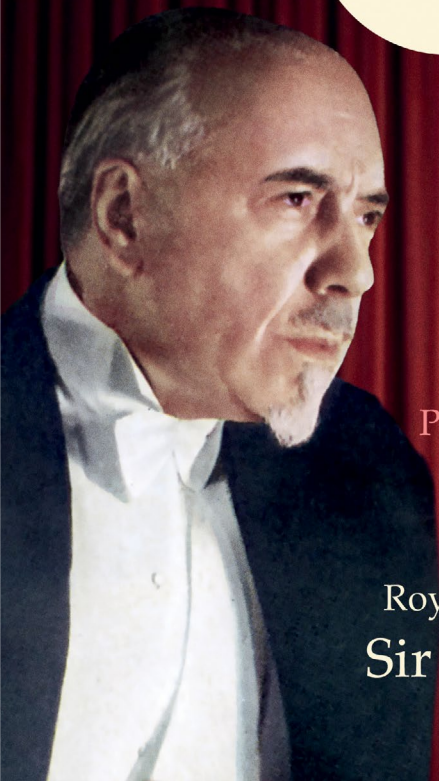


SOMM
RECORDINGS



**THE BEECHAM
COLLECTION**

Live recordings



Orchestral excerpts

BERLIOZ *Les Troyens*
La Damnation de Faust

WAGNER *Tannhäuser*
Parsifal · Götterdämmerung
Die Meistersinger

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Sir Thomas Beecham

BEECHAM CONDUCTS BERLIOZ AND WAGNER

On 6 December 1899 in St Helen's Town Hall the 20-year-old Thomas Beecham conducted the "Hungarian March" from *La Damnation de Faust* with the Hallé Orchestra. It was his professional debut (replacing an indisposed Hans Richter), and the music of Berlioz was to become one of the cornerstones of his repertoire for the next six decades. As well as the overtures, the *Symphonie fantastique* and *Harold in Italy*, Beecham regularly tackled Berlioz's largest works, including the *Te Deum* (for the first time in 1909), the *Requiem* (at the Leeds Festival in 1931 and at concerts in London in 1958 and 1959), a staged performance of *La Damnation de Faust* (at Covent Garden in 1933), a complete broadcast of *Les Troyens* for the BBC in 1947 (and on 9–10 January 1960 in Washington, DC), and *L'Enfance du Christ* (at the 1952 Edinburgh Festival). He evidently admired (and certainly relished) the originality of Berlioz's music, writing in *A Mingled Chime* that "such extraordinary portents as the *Symphonie fantastique* or *La Damnation de Faust* broke upon the world like some unaccountable effort of spontaneous generation which had dispensed with the machinery of normal parentage". It's curious that this is one of only a handful of references to Berlioz in Beecham's autobiography, since he was one of the composer's most enthusiastic British champions. Beecham had performed the Prelude to *The Trojans at Carthage* in 1915 (music that Berlioz created to introduce the separated second part – comprising Acts Three to Five – of his five-act *Les Troyens*; the composer did not see the opera performed whole in his lifetime). The first of Beecham's many performances of the "Royal Hunt and Storm" (an excerpt constituting the whole of *Les Troyens*' Fourth Act) was probably at a concert with the Hallé in

March 1923, and he went on to make commercial recordings of it in 1938, 1945 and 1957. This performance from 1955 is a fine demonstration of the additional electricity that Beecham often generated in a live concert – a few rough corners are quickly forgotten in a reading that is memorable for its atmospheric poetry in the slower sections and the rampaging energy in the faster music. It's given here with the brief choral contribution from Nymphs, Sylvans and Fauns (sung by the Oxford Bach Choir).

Reviewing this concert, the critic in the *Daily Telegraph* noted that “Sir Thomas Beecham’s most delightful concerts are generally those which seem to have been planned for his own enjoyment. So it was ... at the Festival Hall on Saturday night”. This was indeed a programme of Beecham favourites: Lalo’s Symphony in G minor, Delius’s *Sea Drift* (with Bruce Boyce as the soloist), Debussy’s *Nocturnes* and the three Berlioz pieces (it ended with a gloriously uninhibited performance of the “Hungarian March” from *La Damnation de Faust* that brought the house down).

In 1899 the young Thomas Beecham made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth and conducted his first Wagner opera (*Der fliegende Holländer*) a decade later. He remained an enthusiastic Wagnerite throughout his career, though occasionally an irreverent one: in his biography of Beecham, Charles Reid quoted one of Beecham’s more entertaining comments, apparently made during rehearsals for *Götterdämmerung* at Covent Garden in the 1930s: “We’ve been rehearsing for two hours, and we’re still playing the same bloody tune!” Putting the *bons mots* to one side, the surviving evidence for Beecham’s live Wagner in

the theatre, notably extracts from *Meistersinger* in 1951 and the 1937 *Tristan* (both at Covent Garden), reveals a conductor with magnificent Wagnerian instincts that Alan Blyth summed up as an “ability to inject zestful conviction” into the music.

That “zestful conviction” is also strikingly apparent in the four orchestral excerpts recorded at the Royal Festival Hall on 17 December 1958. These formed the first half of a concert that concluded with French repertoire: Saint-Saëns’s *Le Rouet d’Omphale*, Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, the ballet music from Gounod’s *Faust* and Berlioz’s *Trojan March*.

The concert opened with the Overture and Venusberg Music from *Tannhäuser*. This was an opera Beecham had conducted in the theatre (at Covent Garden and, earlier, as a guest in Wiesbaden), and for decades it was one of his warhorses as a concert opener. The arc of the Overture is magnificently managed here, always moving forwards but without any sense of haste. As might be expected, the Venusberg music draws a characteristically flamboyant and colourful response from Beecham and his players.

Beecham never conducted at Bayreuth, though he always hoped to do so. As John Lucas wrote in his illuminating biography, “it had been one of Beecham’s ambitions to conduct at the holy of holies”, but unfortunately his only invitation came in 1933 after Toscanini’s withdrawal from *Parsifal* and *Meistersinger* in protest against the treatment of Jewish musicians. Beecham wisely declined. He also never conducted *Parsifal* in the theatre, prompting Neville Cardus to observe that Beecham was “no more to be associated with *Parsifal* than Noël

Coward with the Oberammergau Passion Play". However, orchestral excerpts from the opera did appear regularly on his concert programmes, including this 1958 concert which featured the "Good Friday Music". It's a performance that keeps moving – flowing freely – while the balance and shading of instrumental colours is beautifully managed.

During his career, Beecham conducted a number of *Ring* cycles, and that experience shows in his account of "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" from *Götterdämmerung*. The music grows patiently before the first of several exciting outbursts of energy: it's an enthralling performance, notable for some radiant wind and brass playing, held together by Beecham's sure-footed combination of theatrical instinct and rhythmic control. On occasions, he could become impatient with the sheer length of Wagner's operas: Neville Cardus recalled a particularly cavalier instance of this during a performance of *Siegfried* at Covent Garden in the 1930s, which "For the first two acts was a musical delight, finished in detail, and balanced to a glowing serenity. Then, in the third act, he went berserk. [Lauritz] Melchior and [Frida] Leider panted and toiled after him in vain. The stylish beginning ended in irresponsible riot." After reading Cardus's review, Beecham explained: "I chanced to look at my watch ... and we were still not half way through Act III – it was getting for eleven o'clock. In the audience were many poor souls who had to go home to remote habitations ... the public houses would close at eleven and my orchestra slaving away since six o'clock were thirsty. So I just let Wagner rip!"

But putting that curious *Siegfried* to one side, Cardus made an interesting observation on Beecham's approach to *The Ring*: "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 texts. In *The Ring* the orchestra was for Sir Thomas three parts of the cycle's substance and interest." It's this concentration on colour and drama rather than philosophical musing that makes his conducting of these orchestral extracts so satisfying and characterful, qualities that are particularly apparent in this "Rhine Journey" from *Götterdämmerung*.

The final item before the interval of the 17 December 1958 concert was the Prelude to Act One of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. When Richard Pohl heard Wagner conducting it at a concert in Mannheim on 20 December 1871, he noted that the performance took "a few seconds over eight minutes". In the era of recordings, few other conductors have approached that, though discs by Albert Coates and Karl Muck from the 1920s came close. Beecham's performances of it were also consistently animated and light on their feet. The surviving live recording of scenes from the performance at Covent Garden in 1951 reveals Beecham's genial and bucolic view of the Overture, as does a 1936 studio recording made for Columbia with the London Philharmonic. This 1958 concert performance is along very similar lines. As Charles Reid noted in his review (*Daily News*, 18 December 1958), "Beecham's Wagner had a cohesion and gusto which make many other Wagner 'treatments' of today seem unconvincing and craven".

For many conductors, including several noted Wagnerians, the tendency – especially since the 1930s – has been to emphasise grandeur rather than momentum in this music. But Beecham keeps things flowing, with clear orchestral textures: the “cohesion and gusto” referred to by Reid. The review in the *Daily Telegraph* (18 December 1958) by “D.M.” (almost certainly Donald Mitchell) described the concert as “a triumph of musicianship”, and praised the freshness and theatricality of the Wagner pieces: “There was nothing old about a single note of the way the orchestra played such masterpieces as ‘Siegfried’s Journey to the Rhine’ or the ‘Meistersinger’ Overture. A wonderful sense of atmosphere dramatised the former, while the thickly overlaid texture of the overture can seldom have been given with such golden clarity.”

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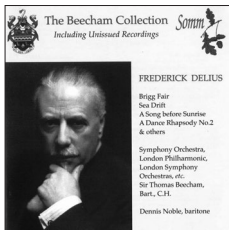
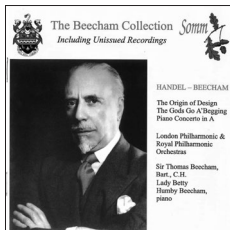
LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer, lecturer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* (“There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – ‘historic’ – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This 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*.

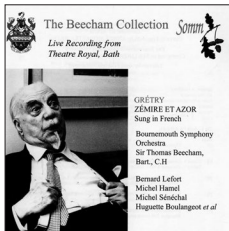
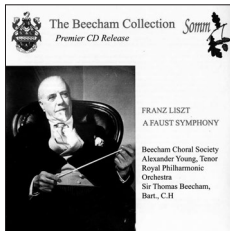
Formerly a leading performer on period oboes in the US, he was a member of *Boston Baroque* and the *Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra of Boston*. In addition, he has appeared with many of North America’s leading period instrument orchestras, including *Tafelmusik*, *Philharmonia Baroque*, *Tempesta 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.



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New to the Collection in 2026:



SOMM-BEECHAM 33



SOMM-BEECHAM 34

THE BEECHAM COLLECTION

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

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

SOMM-BEECHAM 35



Hector Berlioz 1803–1869

Les Troyens, H.133

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Prelude to <i>The Trojans at Carthage</i> ^a | 5:31 |
| 2 | Royal Hunt and Storm ^a (with the Oxford Bach Choir) | 10:10 |

La Damnation de Faust, H.111

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------|
| 3 | Hungarian March ^a | 4:07 |
|---|------------------------------|------|

Richard Wagner 1813–1883

Tannhäuser, WWV 70

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 4 | Overture and Venusberg Music ^b | 22:35 |
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Parsifal, WWV 111

- | | | |
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| 5 | Good Friday Music ^b | 11:00 |
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Götterdämmerung, WWV 86D

- | | | |
|---|--|------|
| 6 | Siegfried's Rhine Journey ^b | 9:37 |
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Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, WWV 96

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|------|
| 7 | Prelude to Act One ^b | 9:20 |
|---|---------------------------------|------|

Total duration:

72:32

Recording (Live):

Royal Festival Hall

^a 7 May 1955

^b 17 December 1958

Executive Producer: **Siva Oke**

Producer, Audio Restoration: **Lani Spahr**

CD mastering: **Paul Arden-Taylor**

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