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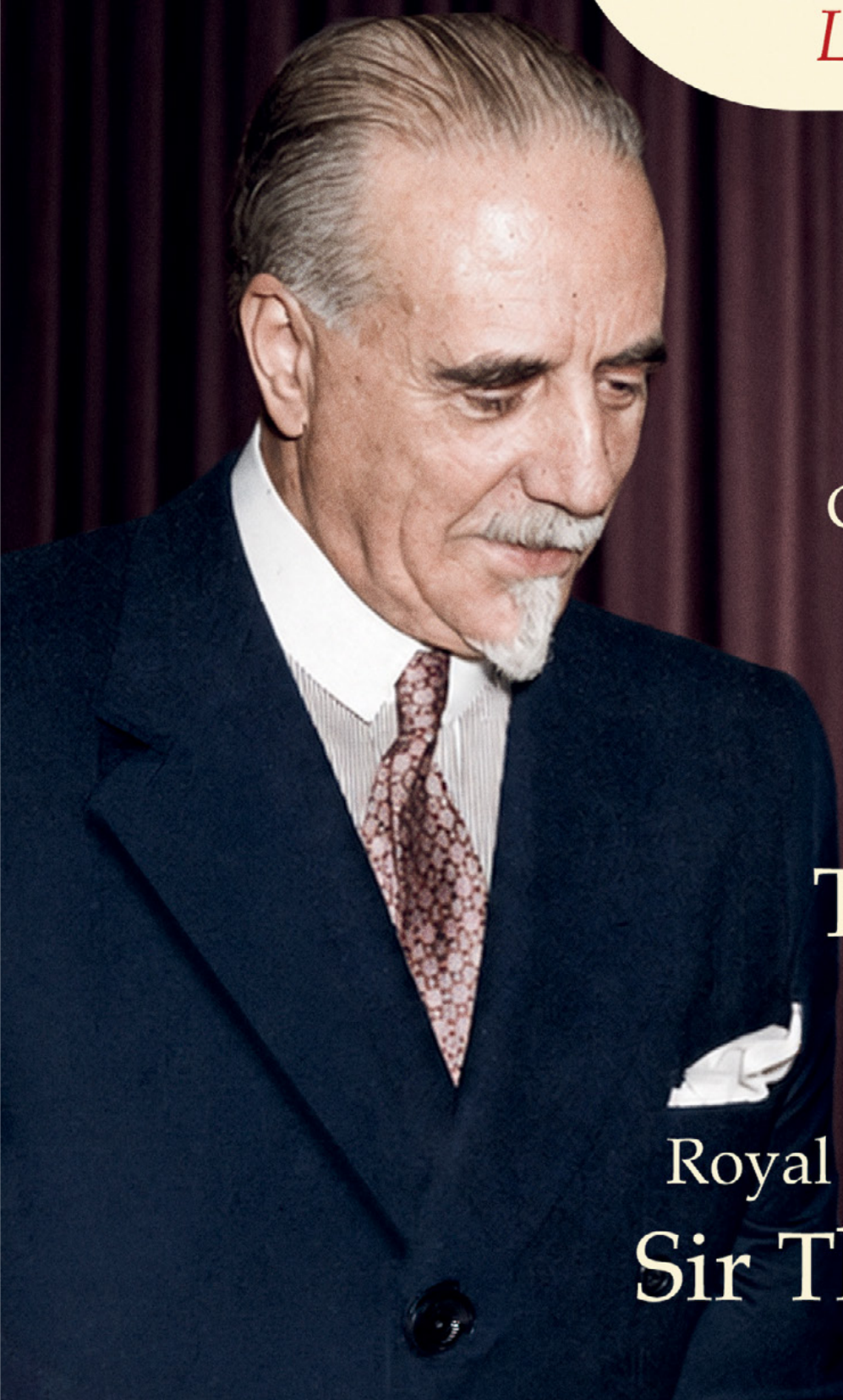

DELIUS

Piano Concerto

Betty Humby

CBS Symphony Orchestra

DEBUSSY

Nocturnes

TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No.2

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Sir Thomas Beecham

Beecham and Debussy

Sir Thomas Beecham (1879–1961) was never known as a Debussy "specialist", but as his friend and concert organiser Felix Aprahamian noted in a 1979 BBC radio broadcast, it was easy to forget "how good a Debussy conductor Beecham was … all Debussy, from the earlier to the latest … found Thomas Beecham in his element". On 16 May 1908, Beecham conducted Henri Büsser's orchestral version of the *Petite Suite* – less than six months after it was premiered in Paris – and in 1918 he made acoustic recordings of two of its movements ("En bateau" and "Ballet"), which reveal a wonderful flair for Debussy's early style. Debussy also featured in Beecham's remarkable 1910 opera season at Covent Garden, where he presented the composer's *L'Enfant prodigue* (on a double bill with *Hänsel und Gretel*) alongside the London premieres of Strauss's *Elektra* and Delius's *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. Two movements from *L'Enfant prodigue*, "Cortège" and "Air de danse", appeared regularly on his orchestral programmes and were recorded for HMV in 1959 (a live performance from the same year has also been published). His mono recordings included *Printemps* and a particularly lovely *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* made with the LPO in 1939 (followed by a stereo remake with the RPO in 1957). Among the major Debussy works that Beecham performed regularly in concerts but never recorded, *Ibéria* (second of the orchestral *Images*) is a frustrating omission. Writing about a performance with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1945, the critic for *The Times* (2 November 1945) noted that "Debussy's *Ibéria* is a French painting of the Spanish scene. By what alchemy of art are sights, smells, sounds and sensations of a place transmuted into tones plucked and blown from strings and tubes? This is one of the mysteries of music, yet a conductor as sensitive to all that goes under the name of sensibility as Sir Thomas Beecham has no difficulty in releasing upon South Kensington the *genius loci* of Spain imprisoned in Debussy's score. He possesses the right magic."

That "magic" can certainly be heard in the performance of the *Nocturnes* given in Beecham's Royal Festival Hall concert with the RPO on 7 May 1955, on a programme that included several of the conductor's favourite pieces: Lalo's Symphony in G minor, Delius's *Sea Drift* (with Bruce Boyce as the soloist) and excerpts by Berlioz (the Prelude and "Royal Hunt and Storm" from *Les Troyens* and the Hungarian March from *La Damnation de Faust*, available on SOMM-BEECHAM 35). The Debussy came immediately after the interval; it was a much rarer work in Beecham's repertoire and one he never recorded commercially. Four decades earlier he had conducted a warmly received performance of it at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert on 31 January 1916. The critic for *The Scotsman* (1 February 1916) wrote that "mention must be made of the wonderfully vivid performance Sir Thomas Beecham directed of Debussy's three *Nocturnes*. In the final number of these it would seem vain to expect an ideal rendering of 'the mysterious song of the passing sirens', but in the softer portions tonight's choir came within measurable distance of this desirable goal." The critic for *The Times* (1 February 1916) was of the same view, writing that "Debussy's three *Nocturnes* for orchestra were extremely well played under Sir Thomas Beecham's direction, and the women's voices in the last of the three were made to blend with the orchestral tones in a way very rarely achieved".

In May 1955, regulars at the Festival Hall had the unusual opportunity to hear the *Nocturnes* on consecutive evenings: the night after Beecham's concert, the LPO and Jean Martinon opened their programme with "Nuages" and "Fêtes". As in 1916, Beecham's performance was well received. John Warrack wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* (9 May 1955) that "Sir Thomas Beecham's most delightful concerts seem to have been planned for his own enjoyment. So it was in his programme with the RPO and the Oxford Bach Choir at the Festival Hall on Saturday night." The critic for *The Times* (9 May 1955) praised the choir, which "added its quasi-instrumental effects to Debussy's 'Sirènes'", and the RPO, which "produced prodigies of phrasing and tonal nuance".

All those qualities are just as striking 70 years later. Beecham's patient unfolding of "Nuages" reveals the subtlest orchestral colouring, and the women's voices in "Sirènes" are superbly integrated into the sound picture: the result is ravishing without ever being indulgent. "Fêtes" is, above all, very exciting, but Beecham's handling of the central section may come as a surprise. We know from Debussy's own programme note that he had in mind "a procession which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged with it". What Beecham does here is something that is most unlikely to happen in a procession: as the music gets louder (and the procession comes closer), Beecham gets gradually *faster*. This is a very personal approach, and an unexpected one. Somehow it all works, perhaps because Beecham's performance as a whole so well matches Debussy's exhilarating description of this movement as "the festival, with its blending of music and luminous dust, participating in the cosmic rhythm".

Delius's Piano Concerto

In December 1941 *Gramophone*'s American correspondent wrote, "The recent performance here of Betty Humby and Sir Thomas Beecham, with the Columbia Broadcasting Symphony, of Delius's Piano Concerto has brought forth many wishes for a recording of the work". Beecham and Humby (1908–1958) had met in London during the 1930s, but in 1941 they were reintroduced in New York by Andrew Schulhof, who also arranged for the present broadcast of the Delius Piano Concerto, which was recorded on 22 June that year. As John Lucas wrote in *Thomas Beecham: An Obsession with Music*, it was an auspicious encounter for conductor and pianist:

> The CBS concert, which took place on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of an oppressive heat wave, was not a major date in New York's musical calendar, but for Beecham and Humby it always held a particular significance, for it marked the start of what would turn out to be a close and lasting relationship.

Sir Thomas Beecham and Betty Humby Beecham


A MINGLED CHIME

Just over a year and a half later, in February 1943, Beecham and Humby were married and remained so until her death in 1958. Back in London after the war, they recorded the Delius together in December 1946, but for several reasons that version was not a success. Humby's playing is not at its best, and the sound is problematic. In his *Gramophone* review of a 1979 reissue of the recording, Felix Aprahamian wrote that "the plummy piano tone seemed to have been recorded on a foggy day". The New York broadcast is altogether happier. John Lucas described it as "a performance of engaging dash – greatly superior to the commercial recording that Humby and Beecham made five years later – that surely reflects the excitement of their new-found relationship".

Delius started work on his Piano Concerto in 1897, completed it in 1904 and revised it extensively in 1907. Beecham was always an enthusiastic advocate, conducting it on numerous occasions. But in his book *Frederick Delius* (1959), he alluded to its rather mixed reputation, even among Delians: "This piece has excited more differences of opinion as to its merits than any other of the composer, with the exception of the *Requiem*. Frederick himself professed to have grown tired of it, and some learned wiseacres have roundly abused it: one going so far as to compare it unfavourably with the *Warsaw Concerto*!" One of the most vigorous dissenters was Arthur Hutchings. In his *Delius* (1948), he had nothing good to say about the work, declaring that "rarely has so wretched a plant been rescued and nourished; rarely has a great composer written such drivel". Whatever its shortcomings may be, and despite Hutchings' condemnation of it – the Piano Concerto can be a thoroughly enjoyable experience in a really engaging performance, and that's certainly what Humby and Beecham give us in their 1941 broadcast.

Beecham's Tchaikovsky

In 1915, Beecham recorded abridged versions of two movements from Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony, and Tchaikovsky would become one of the pillars of Beecham's concert repertoire. Among the symphonies, Beecham was particularly drawn to the more rarely played Second and Third, both of which he performed regularly. (Symphony No.3, live from the Royal Festival Hall on 14 November 1959, is available on SOMM-BEECHAM 36.)

His commercial recording of the Second Symphony – made with the RPO in December 1953 – was among the few of this work readily available in the West at the time. It revealed a distinctive approach to the piece, including an unusually spacious reading of the second-movement march, marked Andantino marziale, quasi moderato and originally composed as a bridal procession for the opera *Undine* (1870). In the live performance from the Royal Festival Hall on 26 October 1954, Beecham still treats this movement in quite an expansive way, but his overall timing is a little quicker, and the music flows more naturally. Even so, the unnamed critic in *The Times* (27 October 1954) was disappointed by "Sir Thomas Beecham's over-cautious tempi" in both the march and the following Scherzo. But Beecham knew what he was doing, placing the emphasis on the symphony's outer movements, and the same *Times* critic noted that "the opening movement, and, in particular, the brilliant and strongly nationalist Finale, found both conductor and gallant players aflame with excitement".

The Finale is slightly cut, as was the custom at the time (Beecham's and Giulini's commercial recordings from the 1950s both have cuts). We may regret this kind of thing, but it doesn't, in my view, detract in any significant way from the impact of the performance

as a whole. More important is the startling conviction of Beecham's conducting and the response of the orchestra. Throughout the symphony, his belief in the music – and his mission to make it better known – is palpable. It's easy to forget that Tchaikovsky's early symphonies were not at all familiar to London audiences in the 1950s: writing in the 1949 Pelican Books symposium on *The Symphony*, Martin Cooper attests that "the first three of Tchaikovsky's symphonies are very seldom played". Beecham did much to promote these works, particularly the Second and Third Symphonies. In the Second Symphony, he clearly relishes the themes drawn from Ukrainian folk music, but never neglects the broader symphonic picture.

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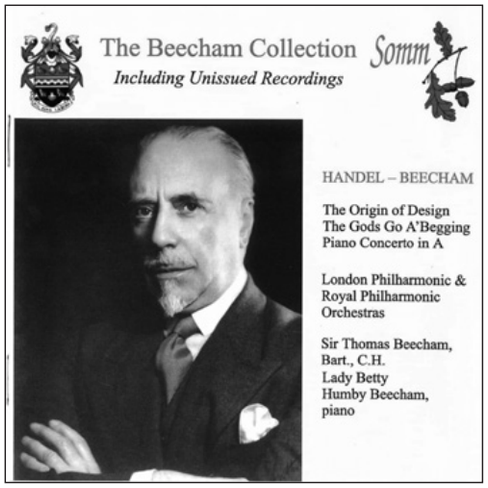
LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer, lecturer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* ("There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – 'historic' – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This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

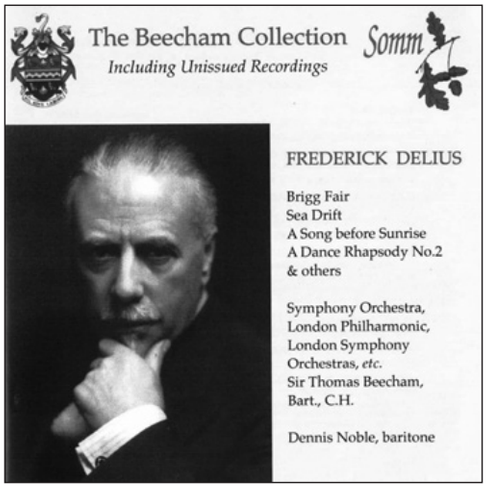
In 2016, BBC Radio 3 presented an hour-long documentary about his stereo reconstructions for *Elgar Remastered* (SOMMCD 261-4). In addition to his close collaboration with SOMM, which has produced several critically acclaimed recordings, his work can be heard on Music & Arts, West Hill Radio Archive, 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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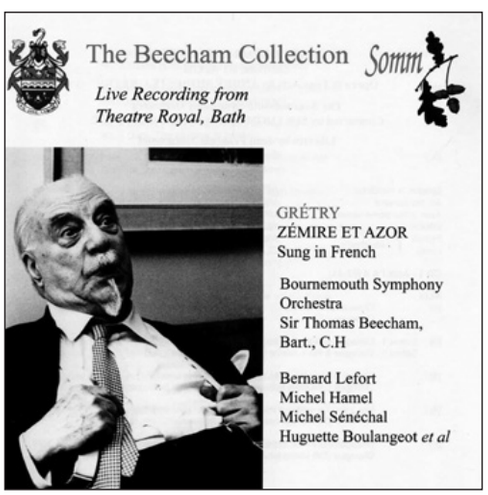



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THE BEECHAM COLLECTION

[b] **Betty Humby** piano
[b] **CBS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**
[a c] **ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**
Conductor: **Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., C.H.**

	Claude Debussy 1862–1918		
	Nocturnes, CD 98 [a]		[23:37]
1	I.	Nuages	8:05
2	II.	Fêtes	6:05
3	III.	Sirènes (with the women of the **Oxford Bach Choir**)	9:26
	Frederick Delius 1862–1934		
	Piano Concerto in C minor, RT VII/4 [b]		[21:30]
4	I.	Moderato	8:52
5	II.	Largo	6:58
6	III.	Maestoso	5:39
	Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky 1840–1893		
	Symphony No.2 in C minor, Op.17 "Little Russian" [c]		[35:59]
7	I.	Andante sostenuto – Allegro vivo	11:11
8	II.	Andantino marziale, quasi moderato	8:39
9	III.	Scherzo: Allegro molto vivace	6:48
10	IV.	Finale: Moderato assai – Allegro vivo	9:20
	Total duration:		**81:17**

Recordings (Live): [b] WABC Studio, New York, 22 June 1941 (CBS Radio transcription disc); Royal Festival Hall, [c] 26 October 1954 & [a] 7 May 1955

Executive Producer: **Siva Oke** · Producer, Audio Restoration: **Lani Spahr**
CD mastering: **Paul Arden-Taylor** · Front Cover Photo © **Tully Potter Collection**
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