



London **Philharmonic** Orchestra

THE FOUNDING YEARS
SIR THOMAS BEECHAM CONDUCTS
THE LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

MOZART *Symphony No.35 Haffner*

CHABRIER *España*

Excerpts from: **SIBELIUS** *The Tempest*

MOZART *Mass in C minor*

HANDEL *Israel in Egypt*

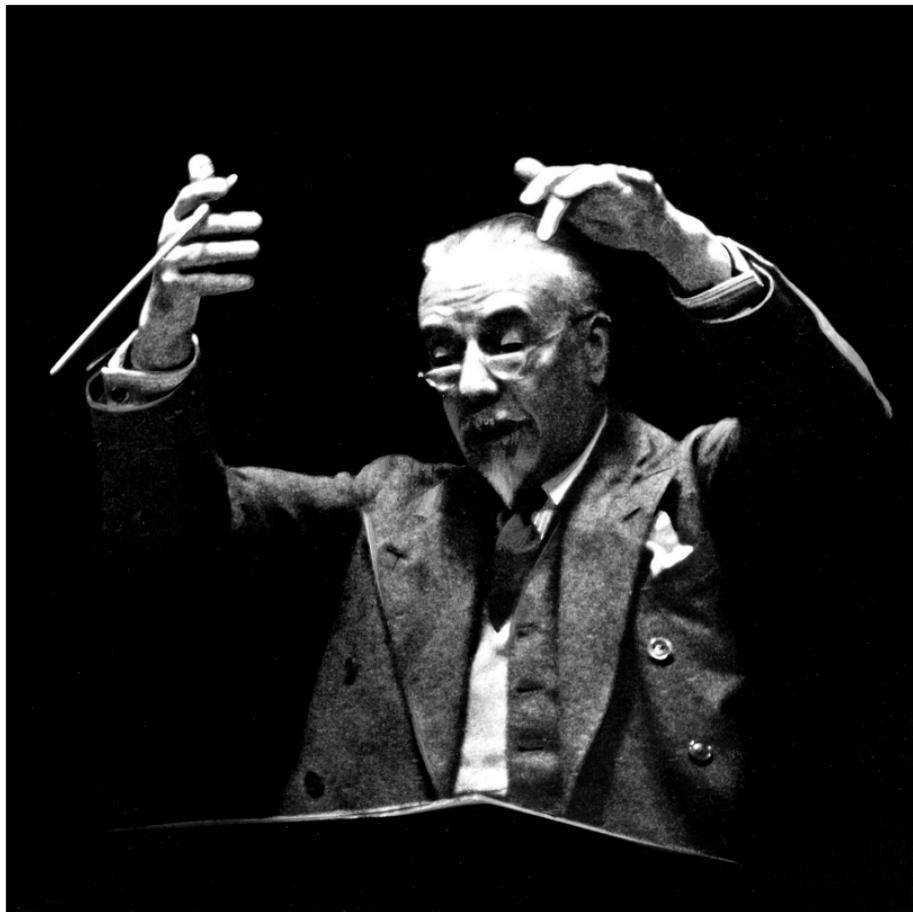
SIR THOMAS BEECHAM AND THE LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA AT THE 1934 LEEDS FESTIVAL

Though few realised it, the 1930s would see the end of many of the great British provincial choral festivals, at least in the way in which they had held sway in England for a couple of hundred years. Some, like the Three Choirs, dated back to the early eighteenth century and, at the beginning of the twentieth, important festivals were still being held in Birmingham, Leeds, Norwich and Sheffield. They were gargantuan affairs: although generally lasting less than a week, with morning as well as evening concerts the musical ground covered was formidable. Sir Thomas Beecham (1879-1961), who had known them all his life, was inclined to write disparagingly of them, especially their orchestral standards, but he was being no more than truthful when he described how 'within three or four days was crowded as much new music as the normal ear could absorb in ten'.

Beecham nevertheless conducted the Leeds Triennial Festivals in 1928, 1931, 1934 and 1937. Part of their attraction for him was the opportunity to mount large-scale choral works too expensive or too difficult to put on in the ordinary way. In 1928, for instance, Leeds heard Berlioz's *Te Deum*, Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* and Delius's *Sea Drift*, and in 1931 Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts*, Delius's

A Mass of Life (and the première of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, although he handed that over to assistant conductor Malcolm Sargent). Another bonus was that, as the choral pieces were prepared by local chorus masters, he had more time to prepare orchestral works and he could invite eminent soloists. Orchestrally, the 1934 festival was especially rich, with Schnabel in Brahms's Second Piano Concerto and Szigeti playing Mozart's Violin Concerto No.4, while the symphonies included both Brahms's and Sibelius's Second; there was Tchaikovsky's Third Orchestral Suite, Delius's *Paris*, Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* and – of outstanding interest – the first performance in England of Sibelius's incidental music for *The Tempest*, among the most recent works to come from the composer's pen.

How was it all fitted in? Each day the morning programmes began at 11am and, with a lunch interval of 90 minutes, finished around 3pm; the evening concerts began at 7.30pm. Today such an outsize entertainment would be unthinkable, but concerts were much longer then: even as late as 1960 the first half of a Henry Wood Prom lasted a full 90 minutes, with the BBC's main evening news enforcing the concert's interval at 9 o'clock. Another point of interest at Leeds in 1934 was that





Sir Thomas Beecham with Jean Sibelius

Beecham brought with him his recording producer Walter Legge and all the equipment necessary to make commercial records for Columbia of some of the repertoire that year: these were Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, Mozart's *Mass in C minor K.427*, Sibelius's *Tempest* incidental music, Delius's *Songs of Sunset* and *An Arabesque*, and Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*. A certain mystery surrounds this intriguing operation – 'We will probably never know the full story of the recordings made by Beecham and the LPO at the Leeds Festival in October 1934', concluded Michael Gray in his *Beecham Discography* (1979) – and it is true that 70 years later we are still only speculating as to precisely when and how they were made.

The absence of applause indicates that they were *not* done at the actual concerts: the resonant acoustic suggests an empty hall, with the extraneous noises to be expected from members of a large chorus and full orchestra in a rehearsal situation. That theory is further supported by Beecham's comments being heard on some of the discs (Delius's *Songs of Sunset* and elsewhere), and the baritone Roy Henderson's memory of his determination not to sing out in the *Arabesque* when Beecham announced casually, 'Some people are recording this' (because Henderson was contracted to another record company). So strong evidence points to the recordings being made during the rehearsal sessions,

held each day between 3pm and 7.30pm; these would in any case have been given up to rehearsing the evening programmes and they are certainly the most likely scenario in the case of the two Delius and the Borodin works, which were all in evening programmes, and for the Sibelius, although here Walter Legge apparently made recordings during the actual concert as well. The Handel choruses were probably done prior to the festival's opening on 3 October: aural evidence indicates that the two sides of 'The Lord is a man of war' were recorded with a pause between each, because the chord at the end of side one of the original 78 is newly played at the beginning of side two. It is possible – though surely unlikely – that something was recorded on 7 October, the day after the last concert and before the London Philharmonic Orchestra left for home so that next day they could be in London to record with him the concerto that Szigeti had played in Leeds.

Although much music was taken down at Leeds, in the event only the Mozart and Handel excerpts and the *Polovtsian Dances* were found to be passable for issue: these were processed during succeeding weeks and Columbia put them on public sale. Among them, Beecham's exciting performance of the *Polovtsian Dances* was regarded as a technical miracle and became a jewel in Columbia's crown for over 20 years. By mistake, a few of

the *Tempest* movements found their way to the USA, but were quickly suppressed. All the issued records were 'dubbings', i.e. re-recorded onto a second disc, resulting in two layers of 78rpm shellac noise muddying the musical sound: the difference can be heard on track 15 of this CD, where the original test-pressing of the first part of 'The Lord is a man of war' which has survived can be heard. All the *Tempest* music was suppressed because when he heard the discs Sibelius had reservations (although it was quickly discovered that he was listening on faulty equipment: after completely rejecting the *Prelude*, for instance, he subsequently found it 'excellent'). Walter Legge had written on 22 October 1934 to tell him of the performance of his music at Leeds and about the recordings he had made. These were being sent to Finland, and he wanted Sibelius's opinion of them: 'I don't want a testimonial. I want to know exactly where the performance coincides with your wishes and where it can be improved ...' This approach was unusual: when writing to composers Legge generally sought unequivocal approval and a response couched in terms that could be used for favourable advertising purposes; one may surmise that he had already decided that the records were not going to be published.

If the *Tempest* excerpts give an exciting glimpse of Beecham and the London Philharmonic Orchestra at rehearsal, the Mozart symphony

and Chabrier rhapsody demonstrate what could be achieved in the ideal conditions of the recording studio. The *Haffner* Symphony was recorded in two sessions in November 1938 and July 1939, but the performance heard here, except for the first few minutes, is from the second. It shows Beecham and his players at their best, all refinement and tenderness in the *Andante*, exquisite in the rise and fall of the *trio* section of the *Minuet* (itself played in the conductor's best 'molto pomposo' style) and proud, virile and tingling with vitality in the outer movements. Finally, *España*, one of the most celebrated of all the 200 or so discs that Beecham made during the 1930s for Columbia with the orchestra that he founded in 1932: the swagger, brilliance and sheer *joie de vivre* are irresistible, even down to his famous little trick of speeding up the final chords. Who would guess that the first part of this classic performance was recorded one day, the second three weeks later?

Lyndon Jenkins

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London Philharmonic Orchestra

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JEAN SIBELIUS 1865 – 1957

**23:27 The Tempest:
Incidental Music, Op.109**

World première recording

- 01 6:01 Prelude
- 02 1:02 Humoresque
- 03 2:53 The Oak Tree
- 04 0:39 Intrada
- 05 1:58 Berceuse
- 06 1:21 Scene
- 07 1:21 Dance of the Nymphs
- 08 1:34 Prospero
- 09 1:23 Caliban's Song
- 10 1:30 Canon
- 11 3:45 Storm

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART 1756 –
1791**

10:02 Mass in C minor, K.427

- 12 5:53 Kyrie
 - 13 4:09 Qui tollis
- Columbia LB19 (12), Columbia LX370 (13)

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL 1685 – 1759

13:58 Israel in Egypt

- 14 4:35 But as for his people
 - 15 5:07 The Lord is a man of war
 - 16 4:16 Moses and the Children of Israel
- Columbia LX378 (14&16), Columbia LB20 (15)

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART 1756 –
1791**

17:33 Symphony No.35 in D, K.385 (*Haffner*)

- 17 5:23 Allegro con spirito
 - 18 4:39 Andante
 - 19 3:49 Menuetto and Trio
 - 20 3:42 Presto
- Columbia LX851-3

EMMANUEL CHABRIER 1841 – 1894

21 6:08 Rhapsody, España

Columbia LX880

DORA LABBETTE *soprano (12)*
LEEDS FESTIVAL CHORUS *(12-16)*
LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
SIR THOMAS BEECHAM *conductor*
PAUL BEARD *leader (1-16)*
DAVID MCCALLUM *leader (17-21)*