

THE MUSIC OF DELIUS - Volume 2, The Post-War Years 1946-1952 - Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., C.H. - World Records SHB-54 (SH-541 - SH-546, 6 discs, England) (Imported by German News Company)

A Village Romeo and Juliet (Gray no. 258), Violin Concerto (J. Pougnet, Gray no. 199), Piano Concerto (rev. Beecham, B. Humby-Beecham, Gray no. 197), Songs of Sunset\* (omitting "Cease smiling ...", N. Evans, R. Llewellyn, BBC Chorus, Gray no. 209), Song of the High Hills (F. Hart, L. Jones, Luton Choral Society, Gray no. 203), Paa Vidderne\* (orch. Sandheimer, Gray no. 207), Heimkehr\* (M. Thomas, Gray no. 263), When Twilight Fancies (orch. Beecham, E. Suddaby, Gray no. 304), Whither\* and The Violet\* (E. Suddaby, Gray no. 274), Dance Rhapsody no. 1 (Gray no. 321), Dance Rhapsody no. 2\* (Gray no. 196), Marche Caprice (Gray no. 212), Brigg Fair (Gray no. 206), On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring (Gray no. 198); Summer Night on the River (ed. & arr. Beecham), Summer Evening, and A Song Before Sunrise (Gray no. 262); Prelude to Irmelin (arr. Beecham, Gray no. 214), Intermezzo and Serenade from Hassan (Gray no. 321) -- all with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. (\*previously unpublished; Gray numbers refer to Beecham: A Centenary Discography, by Michael Gray, Duckworth, 1979).

Anyone who enjoys the music of Delius should have a copy of this set. Longtime enthusiasts of the composer's work or of Beecham's know this already and probably also own its superb predecessor: "The Early Recordings 1927-1938, 1948", World Records SHB-32. Although the new set is not perfect, it forms both another major landmark on the road of making accessible to the market significant segments of recorded performance practice and a fine finale to A.C. Griffith's superb work for EMI in the transfer of 78-rpm records to lp.

Although the contents are well documented in a booklet of eight pages, several features of this work could have been much improved. Take numbers do not appear, a failing that the first volume shared. The layout assembles for each whole lp side the names of performers and facts about the recordings (matrix numbers, dates, studio, British issue numbers), an arrangement convenient for sides which contain part of a composition or a whole one but awkward for sides which contain several short pieces. Also, everyone involved in the documentation somehow neglected to state that the second side of Songs of Sunset seems never to have been recorded (Michael Gray has supplied this fact), so the listener who has read the notes and labels will receive a distressing shock upon first listening to Side One of Record Four unless he or she has read Gray's discography or has wondered at the missing matrix number in the session or has noted the missing lines in the text as printed. Speaking of printed texts, instead of a libretto for the opera what appears is entitled "Analysis of the Records," which contains a condensed description and excerpts from the text and does at least provide the listener with some idea of the plot. (Perhaps it is a reprint of a booklet prepared for the original 78-rpm issue). Changes in plans because of the death of Douglas Pudney, who had planned to write the sleeve notes for it (as he had done for the

first volume) and to whose memory the set is dedicated may account for these minor but annoying problems. Malcolm Walker, who has worked long and hard on a discography of the music of Delius which, let us hope, will be published soon has provided excellent notes. In them and in the discographical information there are a few minor errors, perhaps typographical, which Michael Gray has corrected from his extensive research. The date of May 21 was omitted from the listings for the opera (but it appears in the notes). Item 4 on Side One of Record Five was recorded October 1, 1949; and the words "in U.K." should be dropped from the recording note on Side Two of that disc. The text of the notes should report that Songs of Sunset would have occupied eight sides, but that only seven were actually made; that the first side of North Country Sketches was recorded three times (though never issued by HMV, it was issued in England on Columbia LX-1399 - LX-1401); that Majorie Thomas made three takes of Heimkehr; that In a Summer Garden was recorded October 27th, 1950; and that When Twilight Fancies was issued in the U.S. on LVT-1020 as well as on LHMV-1050. An especially valuable feature of the notes is their inclusion of the appropriate portions of the recording history of Beecham and his orchestras and of the relationships between performances and broadcasts and recordings of the same works -- it is fascinating to have this information.

In speaking about musical technique Delius said, "The sense of flow is all that matters" (as quoted by W. Mellers in the Delius Society Journal no. 66, p. 19). Sir Thomas Beecham certainly brought "all that matters" to his recorded performances of his friend's music; so far as his efforts are concerned I found it a most welcome and rewarding experience to listen to this set. All the previously issued recordings are old friends from my collection of 78's and previous lp reissues; but preparation for this review provided the first opportunity to study them after a period of several hectic years of limited listening time. Beecham was a master of balance, pacing, and phrasing; he knew just what features and details to emphasize and brought a wonderful continuity to this music which is so difficult to perform. Real tenderness is extremely difficult to convey in a recording with orchestral or operatic forces, but Beecham could achieve this effect superbly: notice, for example, the duet in A Village Romeo and Juliet in Scene 4 just before the Dream -- neglect the squeaks of the soprano and listen to the effect which the conductor made with the help of Soames's singing and the RPO's playing. In the Violin Concerto I was once again struck by how clear Beecham made the form of the piece while maintaining its rhapsodic atmosphere. In Song of the High Hills the conductor provided full measure of passion, a sense of awe and grandeur contrasted with wistfulness and tenderness, as the composer asked; this is one of the great recorded performances. Beecham also made the most of the contrasts in Paa Vidderne, which, as Malcolm Walker points out, is often vigorous and boisterous and sounds derivative in several ways (from Wagner and Scandinavia), with occasional glimpses of the composer's later style, especially in the quieter portions. The performance of Brigg Fair is another masterpiece, one of my favorite recordings; the earlier version (reissued in Volume 1 and the preferred version of several of my friends) is fine also, but I prefer the mellow and dreamy effect

of RPO-1946. Rather than continue and repeat superlatives, I'll conclude this section of commentary with the suggestion that Beecham's superb musicianship, taste, sense of style, and devotion to the cause of Delius's music have provided a great treasure indeed for listeners.

The conductor was the power behind these performances, but of course he used all sorts of resources beyond the many that were his own. Most of them were excellent too. This set provides a partial history of the early years of Beecham's new Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the members of which rarely played less than beautifully and supplied their conductor with all the requisites for superb Delian music-making. A study of this set's notes and of Michael Gray's discography shows how much trouble everyone took to achieve the proper effects: recordings not passed for issue and multiple takes were very frequent (Beecham, like Stokowski, knew what was needed and never spared the recording blanks necessary to obtain his objectives). As to instrumental soloists, in the Violin Concerto Jean Pougnet used his bright and fine tone most sensitively and songfully; and Betty Humby-Beecham gave an unspectacular (a bit lacking in rhythmic life and shaping of phrases) but perfectly adequate performance of her part in the Piano Concerto. In the vocal department the extreme variability of the conductor's fortunes with regard to sopranos was evident, but the other singers were generally very good. Elsie Suddaby produced a lovely interpretation of When Twilight Fancies and good but slightly precious ones of the other two songs in spite of severe technical vocal problems (choked high notes, lack of clarity of many words, considerable change of tone with change of range, etc.); and the less said of Lorely Dyer as Vreli in A Village Romeo and Juliet the better. Marjorie Thomas did an excellent job in Heimkehr, and Nancy Evans showed a strong evenly-produced voice in her parts of Songs of Sunset. In spite of some problems in the low range and a tendency to "swallow" some tones, Redvers Llewellyn's performance in the same cycle was eloquent, particularly in "I was not sorrowful." In the opera, the singers portraying major roles (aside from that of Vreli) did excellent jobs (Gordon Clinton in spite of a voice too light for the Dark Fiddler), and René Soames overcame his reedy, rather elderly-sounding tone in a successful effort to characterize the part of Sali. Overall, with the few notable exceptions then, the level of musical support for the conductor was first-rate.

There are in this set eight works (about one full lp disc-worth, counting The Walk to the Paradise Garden in the opera as "separate") of which earlier recordings were issued in Volume One. Aside from The Walk..., these are Summer Night on the River, Prelude to Irmelin, Intermezzo and Serenade from Hassan, Brigg Fair, On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring, When Twilight Fancies (Evening Voices), and the pair of songs Whither and The Violet. Thus there is much opportunity for fascinating study of the styles and qualities of playing, the types of recorded sound, the differences in Beecham's performances of Delius, etc. over a considerable period of time, ranging from a minimum of about seven years to a maximum of twenty-two. I have briefly mentioned Brigg Fair in discussion above; and in First Cuckoo I found the first side of the newer

recording less atmospheric although better played than that in the earlier set. In Volume One Dora Labbette sang and enunciated words much better than Elsie Suddaby did in Volume Two, but the recorded sound was more distant in the earlier version. In comparing some of the duplications I found that the earlier recordings' lack of full bass response was disturbing and that in some cases in the earliest recordings the orchestral playing was rather less than excellent. In both periods, however, Beecham was certainly himself and the superb interpreter of Delius in all cases; and so I urge anyone who has doubts and anyone who is interested to obtain both sets and spend as much time as possible in the fascination of learning from comparisons. Quantity and quality combine in these volumes, and "more" is "better", not to mention the fact that the more different recorded performances one can hear of the same work by the same interpreters, the closer one approaches a sense of how it may have been to hear actual concerts by those musicians. In truly foolish and greedy moments inspired by preparing this review, I even found myself wishing that all the rejected takes and recordings could return; for study.

Although Beecham's position of having recorded the most music of Delius in the best performances will likely remain unchallenged, there have been (and still are) other conductors who understand what matters (the sense of flow) in Delius's music, for example, Constant Lambert, Geoffrey Toye, and Meredith Davies, and who have recorded one or more of the works found in this volume. They deserve mention here for the benefit of those who wish to extend their comparative listening. A Village Romeo and Juliet is well worth hearing in as many performances as possible (except perhaps when done as badly as by the New York City Opera, where it was only worth watching the lovely sets), particularly the Sadler's Wells version with Davies conducting and Elsie Morison outstanding in the role of Vreli. Anyone who likes either the Violin Concerto or the Piano Concerto should obtain World Records SH-224. On that disc Albert Sammons, the dedicatee of the Violin Concerto, gave it a more old-fashioned and less virtuosic performance than did Pougnet but one with perhaps even more variety of sound and expression. Sammons's tone was darker and fuller than Pougnet's; because of the lack of detail and dynamic range in the original recording, however, the orchestra sounded submerged and its interplay with the soloist was not well captured. On the other side of that lp, in dry but wide-range sound with an orchestra less accustomed to the style of Delius than was Beecham's, Benno Moiseiwitch and Constant Lambert appear in an exuberant, well-phrased rendition of the Piano Concerto, including an especially lovely account of the slow section. Both recordings have been well transferred so that the music comes effectively through the noise of the source-discs. Although he recorded Songs of Sunset three times, Beecham never approved any version for release (although the third was finally issued in 1963 on ALP-1983). The soloists in the version issued in Volume Two not only sang better than their counterparts in the 1957 version, but their words were more clearly audible, in spite of the later version's better recorded sound. However, in the earlier version the chorus sounded undersized and the general

effect of recording was to make everything too loud and too close; the perspective and contrasts emerged more successfully from the later recording. We should be glad to be able to hear both and should hope that one day the earliest version, with the eloquent Roy Henderson as baritone soloist, may be issued.

Next the subject of the recorded sound and of the transfers to lp arises. As I indicated at the beginning of the review, this project was the final one carried out by A.C. Griffith before his departure from EMI after years of truly expert work. I understand that listeners should not hold Mr. Griffith responsible for the two unfortunate cases in which he had to work from extremely crackly originals (probably grainy HMV shellac pressings); given various kinds of deadlines, he had to do the best possible job without access to quiet sources which certainly do exist, at least in several archives. Those two cases are the March Caprice, for which even my slightly worn postwar Victor copy is considerably quieter than the source used, and the Brigg Fair, for which my well-used Victor transparent-red-vinyl copy is much cleaner and quieter than EMI's source. These two recordings are the only ones in the set in which the transfer has resulted in sound inferior to that on the 78's, I suspect because the filtering and equalizing necessary to minimize the effect of the loud crackle has prevented optimum results. This complaint aside, I have only the highest praise for Mr. Griffith's success in using his expert skill, extensive experience, and consummate taste and artistry in the service of these valuable performances. There have been excellent recording engineers at all stages of recording; and for most of the sessions in this set the experts of the time were on hand at the fine No. 1 Studio, Abbey Road, to supply Beecham and his fellow-artists with the best possible recorded sound. That best is highly respectable for any time: nearly all the recordings present were originally bright, fairly full, and well-balanced; and Mr. Griffith has subtly helped them to sound still fuller and better-balanced. The earlier among them can be detected by the slight fuzziness at the loudest levels near the ends of the original 78-rpm sides or a slight dynamic restriction in the same places. As quality progressed over time (in this case), the listener may notice that the sound became fuller and detail a bit clearer. In general, though, the original sound and the transfers are so fine that it is necessary to concentrate on the sound as such to discover the problems; I found the original engineers and Mr. Griffith had done their work so well that only when the material recorded in 1952 came along did I really become aware of the change and replay various passages in order to be able to describe what had been happening. In comparison to Volume One, by the way, and a definite advantage in terms of the fullness and dynamic range of these recordings, the average number of 78-rpm sides per lp-side has been decreased from over seven to between five and six. Mr. Griffith has worked most successfully to achieve the following important goals, among others: to play back the source-discs in a way that reproduces their full sound properly, to filter noise so that it becomes a uniform, low-level signal that seems to be at a distance from the music and is often no more obtrusive than low-level tape hiss on more modern recordings, to compensate for the effects on the original

cutter of decreasing groove-length per revolution as it approached the centers of sides, to edit sides together so that the listener feels no shock or minimal shock at side-changes (this is an especially difficult problem in the flow of Delius's music and must have caused Beecham and the other musicians, as well as Mr. Griffith, a great deal of trouble), and to provide any equalization possible that will correct deficiencies in the correctness of response in the original recordings (I list some of these goals for emphasis and general notice in these days when, even with the availability of instruments such as the Packburn, which itself does so much of the process of suppressing noise without affecting sound, and various sophisticated equalizers, etc., there are still so many reissues that sound far worse than mediocre copies of the originals).

Mr. Griffith's greatest challenge must have been A Village Romeo and Juliet; for recording opera has been at best extremely tricky work and was especially so in the days of 78's with the problem of achieving continuity over large numbers of separately recorded sides which usually could not be recorded in score order. The original engineers had their problems with this recording (I should probably say "these recordings" because of the many sides and eight sessions): the issued 78's had frequent variations in balance and perspective from side to side as well as unevennesses of level. The buyer of the reissue must not expect "stage presence" or a consistent balance of voices and orchestra because those qualities were not in the originals; but considering the wealth of difficulties and the occasionally (and relatively slightly) apparent problems of condition of the source-sides, Mr. Griffith's achievement is remarkable: the sound is much smoother than that on the 78's, the shrillness present on many of the original sides has been decreased, the general balance has been much improved, and the continuity is surprisingly good. In view of his work on this immense problem as well as the superb quality of almost all of the rest of the recordings in this volume, this set can stand as a most suitable valedictory to his years of service to EMI. Many of us who are interested in early recordings sincerely hope that he will either continue use of his great skills elsewhere or find people whom he can instruct, or both.

Finally, the question of previous transfer efforts arises, at least for those with limited budgets who may have some of the earlier reissues and who may wonder if this new six-record set is worth investing in only for the previously unissued material, the superb quality of the new transfers, or the recordings (such as A Village Romeo and Juliet) which appear on lp for the first time. The two single lp's issued by HMV for the Delius Centenary (ALP-1889, ALP-1890) stood out in their time for quality of transfer work generally faithful to the original sound, with only slightly diminished high-frequency response and occasional bits of added distortion but with no credit given for the engineering. The first contained Song of the High Hills, Dance Rhapsody No. 1, Summer Evening, The Prelude to Irmelin, and the Intermezzo and Serenade from Hassan; and the second the two concertos. Victor LVT-1045 presented a dull and tubby dubbing of Song of the High Hills and a rather bass-less, distant, and fuzzy-sounding Piano Concerto. The collection of Dance Rhapsody No. 1,

First Cuckoo, and the two "Summer" pieces plus Song before Sunrise, the Hassan selections, and When Twilight Fancies (its only previous issue) included on Victor LHMV-1050 contained variably noisier and harsher transfers than either the Centenary HMV's or the new set, with the single exception of the Hassan items, which sounded nearly as good as the present issue. Dance Rhapsody No. 1 appeared with dulled high frequencies and inadequate bass on HMV HQM-1165; and the Irmelin selection had a faithful transfer with considerable hiss present on HMV HLM-7093. Considering the inferior qualities of these other reissues and the fact that at least half of the recordings in this new volume are making either their first appearance on long-playing records or their very first published appearance, there is every reason for everyone with appropriate interests to marshal the resources necessary to acquire a copy of Volume Two.

In conjunction with its predecessor this second volume of Sir Thomas Beecham's recordings of the music of Delius is surely a most important and valuable treasure in the history of performance practice. It is especially valuable because the original and transfer engineers' skills have made particularly faithful images of the superb performances recorded. But above all it preserves for everyone who wishes to hear a double measure of musical genius; for, as the notes conclude, "Surely no composer could have been better served by his finest interpreter so devotedly and incomparably."

Richard Warren Jr.