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## BEECHAM'S HALF CENTURY: A SURVEY OF HIS CD REISSUES

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**By Harry Butler**

"Never forget me." These were Sir Thomas Beecham's last words to his wife, Shirley, Lady Beecham, before succumbing to a second cerebral thrombosis on March 8th, 1961, two months short of his 82nd birthday. Thirty-two years later, his deathbed request has assumed an ironic dimension Beecham himself would have savored.

With more of his recordings in print today than during his lifetime, thanks to the overwhelming success of the CD format, it seems virtually *impossible* to forget or ignore his massive body of work. The total number of Beecham CD reissues is approaching 50 (in cricketer's terms, a 'half century'), almost one for every year Sir Thomas made records. The generations born during and after the podium reign of England's greatest conductor can now trace his career via CDs from 1927, his first Delius recording, to his last sessions in 1959. Sir Thomas's first recordings were made acoustically in 1910, but the truncated sonics of these early discs in no way accurately preserve Beecham's unique orchestral balance.

Beecham's repertoire was vast, greater in fact than his substantial recorded legacy. Unfortunately, many works conducted in concert as well as hundreds of his operatic productions, were never recorded commercially or privately.

When EMI launched The Beecham Edition on April 29, 1990, the anniversary of his birthday, it marked the first concerted effort to assemble on one label Sir Thomas' best work for three major recording companies, EMI, RCA, and CBS. His acclaimed stereo recordings for EMI in the late 1950s of works by Bizet, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Mozart among others had been quickly remastered for CD, but his equally fine work in mono, primarily for CBS plus a few titles for RCA, had languished in corporate vaults for over 30 years.

The first seven releases in the much publicized Beecham Edition featured single CDs of orchestral works by Balakirev and Tchaikovsky, a compilation of shorter works by Bizet, Fauré, Debussy, Saint-Saëns, and Delibes, symphonies by Schubert, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, plus three CDs of Sibelius symphonies, tone poems, and incidental music—in most cases, pairing EMI and CBS originals of a complimentary nature on the same disc, handsomely presented, with generous playing times, in uniformly excellent sound.

A second release of six CDs, delayed by the global recession, appeared in January 1992 under the new EMI Classics corporate logo. New titles included a 'Lollipops' disc of shorter works by Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Debussy, Grieg, and Berlioz, the Franck and

Lalo symphonies, works by British composers Bantock, Bax, and Lord Berners, a reissue of the Mozart Clarinet and Bassoon Concertos (previously available on CD at full price) now coupled with the Violin Concerto No. 3, Sibelius's Symphonies 4 and 6 (an RCA recording), and the 1957 mono recording of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, the stereo remake having been an earlier full price issue.

As before, both presentations and what Sir Thomas would have called "the general welter of sound" were splendid, but unlike the case of the first release, and to the dismay of Beecham's large American audience, Angel chose to release only the "Lollipops," Sibelius and Berlioz CDs. Responding however to numerous requests, all of the titles originally passed on as permanent catalog items now have been made available as special imports priced exactly as other titles in the series.

Additionally, Angel has issued a disc of their own to honor the centenary of Joseph Szigeti. Beecham, conducting his own London Philharmonic, accompanies the violinist in three concertos: The Mozart 4th, the Mendelssohn, and the Prokofiev. New vinyl pressings from the original 78 rpm metal masters have been used by Andrew Walter of EMI's Abbey Road Studios for the best possible sound transfer and Szigeti's daughter has allowed Angel to use several unpublished photos for the booklet.

Conspicuous by their absence from the second release were several mono CBS items scheduled by EMI producer John Holland for inclusion, which were in fact the *raison d'être* of the Beecham Edition as first conceived, namely, the Columbia recordings of Delius's *Sea Drift*, *Arabesk*, and the Incidental Music for *Hassan*, as well as Beecham's performance of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* with William Primrose, viola, plus two overtures, *King Lear*, Op. 4 and *Roman Carnival*, Op. 9. All have appeared subsequently on a pair of CDs in Sony Classical's Masterworks Portraits series, now available in the U.S. as well as Europe.

The greater-than-expected success of the series prompted both BMG Classics (RCA) and Sony Classical (CBS) to reconsider their generous licensing agreement with EMI. This is disappointing from EMI's perspective, but who can blame Sony or BMG when the 40-year-old analog recordings trigger more critical interest (and sales?) than the identical repertoire in digital sound from contemporary conductors? It would appear that the reports of Sir Thomas' passing, from the musical scene, at least, were exaggerated.

The Columbia recordings dating from 1951 (*Harold*) to 1956 (*Hassan*), like their EMI counterparts, have been remastered beautifully, with only a trace of tape hiss. Other CBS titles originally proposed for the Beecham Edition said to be candidates for reissue by Sony Classical, provided the master tapes can be located—not always a valid assumption—are Beethoven's *Eroica* and *Pastoral* Symphonies, Berlioz's *Te Deum*, Elgar's *Enigma* Variations, and Mozart's Requiem and last six symphonies.

In similar fashion, BMG Classics has made Beecham's 1932 Carnegie Hall recording of *Don Quixote* with the New York Philharmonic (with Alfred Wallenstein, cello) available in a two-CD set of *Legendary Strauss Recordings*. Ward Marston's stunning new transfers reveal even greater orchestral detail than Anthony Griffith's for EMI's HMV Treasury LP which was issued in 1979 to mark Beecham's centenary. Beecham was the first to record these *Fantastic Variations on a Knightly Theme*, and his extraordinary reading, at turns dramatic and poignant, brings out the 'madness' of Strauss's *Don* more effectively than any recorded performance since.

RCA Executive Producer John Pfeiffer also hopes to reissue on a single CD, presumably in new transfers of equal quality, the vocal and orchestral excerpts from four Strauss operas which Beecham recorded for RCA in 1947 and 1948, shortly after his gala Strauss festival in London, with the 84-year-old composer as guest of honor. These are

the closing scenes from *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Elektra* (last seen on LP in the UK only), plus the love scenes from *Feuersnot* and Interlude from *Intermezzo* (once available on a World Records LP).

Also from BMG on a three-CD Gold Seal set comes Handel's and Beecham's *Messiah* in stereo from 1959, his last year in the studio. Beecham's extensive rescoring, assisted by long-time collaborator Sir Eugene Goossens, brims with unprecedented orchestral color, and is likely to generate as much controversy today as it did three decades ago. Lady Beecham, who welcomes its reissue, recalls:

I know not all the critics liked it, but it's Sir Thomas's version of the *Messiah* after some sixty years of studying the works of Handel, of considering what the halls were like when Handel wrote the *Messiah*, and having thought of present day orchestral facilities.

Beecham's own remarks were typically blunt. When asked what the purists would say to his *Messiah*, he replied,

I never think about the purists. They are a breed that has sprung up recently. If Handel and many other composers were left to the purists, with their parsimonious handfuls of strings and oboes, you would never hear any of them... Handel, who played the organ, clavichord or harpsichord in these performances, was the greatest *improvvisatore* of his day. Anybody who had the good fortune, as I had, to hear the improvisations of the greatest cathedral organists of the 19th century knows what extraordinary things the *improvvisatore* can do in 'filling-in.'

It is this uninhibited, vibrant spirit of improvisation, the true benchmark of a great musician, which makes Sir Thomas's performances glow more brilliantly with every rehearing.

Officially, the third release in EMI's Beecham Edition schedule for fall of 1992 is last. The series concludes with a pair of two-CD box sets, one mono, one stereo, of Haydn symphonies, Beethoven's Mass in C, the Delius opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, and appropriately enough a rehearsal disc providing Sir Thomas himself with the last word in the matter. The rehearsal disc, originally issued by HMV on a mono LP, and subsequently by World Records, captures a magisterial Sir Thomas cajoling the RPO through various Haydn symphonies, bits of Liszt's *Orpheus*, and Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail*, punctuated by several examples of his coruscating wit. Did any conductor ever have as much fun making music for so long with so many musicians as did Sir Thomas?

When EMI began digitizing the original session tapes, producer Ken Jagger discovered something else on them as well.

At the very end of the tape was a most extraordinary thing really, something that Beecham never recorded commercially, the Beethoven 5th Symphony in rehearsal. It was recorded at the end of a session, and obviously, he just decided, come on chaps, we'll have a run through this, and obviously wasn't happy with it, so it's just languished there.

Sir Thomas's impulsive sweep of the mighty 5th can now be heard in the company of other informal snippets.

To suggest EMI's winding down of the Beecham Edition signals the end of their interest in restoring additional Beecham titles to the catalog may be premature. There are still a number of 78 rpm performances worthy of either a *Great Recordings of the Century* or *References* release, such as Sir Thomas's droll performances of Rossini overtures, as well as certain Haydn symphonies he never re-recorded. Also, the complete stereo recordings of Haydn's *The Seasons* and Handel's *Solomon* could well appear in EMI's revamped Studio+ series, while Beecham's 1949 recording of Gounod's *Faust*, the only one of six complete operas commercially recorded by Sir Thomas still unissued on

CD, cries out for reissue alongside his *Zauberflöte*, *La Boheme*, *Entführung*, and *Carmen*, as well as a remastered, complete Beecham *Tristan*.

What should have been the jewel among EMI's historical reissues, *Tristan und Isolde*, was recorded in performance at Covent Garden, June 1937, with the greatest Wagnerian cast of the day: Lauritz Melchior, Kirsten Flagstad, Sven Nilsson, Herbert Janssen, Margarete Klose, accompanied by Beecham's London Philharmonic Orchestra. It stands now as a colossal embarrassment to EMI.

Inadvertently sandwiching together test pressings from two radically different performances, one conducted by Beecham, the other by Fritz Reiner, and releasing them as a "Beecham" performance was an exasperating blunder. But merely affixing a sticker to the box redesignating it a "Beecham/Reiner" performance, does not rectify the problem. If anything, it exacerbates it, not to mention being thoroughly at odds with the highest artistic standards we have come to expect from EMI's Beecham reissues.

A complete set of test pressings in good condition is indeed extant and accessible through the Beecham Archive. The present "Beecham/Reiner" travesty should be withdrawn immediately, particularly as VAI has issued on CD the complete Reiner *Tristan* expertly remastered from HMV test pressings by Ward Marston. Restoring Beecham's critically acclaimed performance is neither impossible nor difficult. Expensive? Possibly. But how could a company which has been called the "World's Greatest Recording Organization," and justifiably so, afford to do otherwise?

Sir Thomas Beecham indeed has been remembered, if not consistently well served by his recording companies. But if his personality is to loom as large in the future as it does currently, it may well result from the tireless and largely unsung labors of the very person first charged with this responsibility, Shirley, Lady Beecham. In the decades following Sir Thomas's death, Lady Beecham has honored her husband's memory by finding a permanent home for the Beecham Archive, and by establishing a scholarship program for young musicians in Sir Thomas's name funded in part through the sale of CD reissues of Beecham recordings. It has not been easy. The Beecham estate was assessed hundreds of thousands of pounds in death duties based on Sir Thomas's overseas royalties, which required almost 20 years to pay off. Today, the Beecham Archive, so very nearly lost to the taxman, represents a veritable aesthetic gold mine of recordings for those drawn to Sir Thomas's artistry.

Filling wall after wall of shelving at Denton House are white label test pressings spanning Sir Thomas's entire recording career, recorded lectures for the BBC and the Library of Congress, and tapes of Beecham concerts from the late 1950s at London's Festival Hall. One reason for such complete coverage of Beecham's career is explained by Lady Beecham:

One of the critics took him to task one day about playing something too fast. Well, when the performance is over, it's in your ear. Whether you heard it fast or whether you didn't, nobody can prove it. So Sir Thomas said, right, from now on we will record *everything*, so that if there is a query we can play it back to the offending critic! So there is quite a lot of material.

Though aware of the Archive's commercial potential, Lady Beecham remains mindful of the cost of doing things. "I wish I didn't have to be so mindful. There are so many projects and so many things I wish I could do while I still have my health and strength, but money does play quite a big part in it."

Through the Archive Lady Beecham already has made available many rare and unpublished recordings from both EMI and CBS, including Sir Thomas's pioneer Delius recordings from the 1930s. Currently, five volumes comprise the Beecham Collection

(distributed in the U.S. by Albany Music), with new releases planned as often as funds from the sale of previous ones permit. One hundred percent of the profits from the sale of these discs, less the expense of remastering and marketing, are placed in the scholarship fund.

If a sponsor willing to invest £20,000 or so could be found we could go on much quicker with our plans for the Beecham Collection, doing things at a much better pace. As it is, we have to more or less leap frog from one release to the other. When we've issued one and it sold well, then we have the money in the pocket again to do the next, and it is on that basis only that we can operate.

Lady Beecham stresses that the whole operation at the Beecham Archive is to get money for the scholarship fund.

What we want to do is make the next generation equally aware of Sir Thomas's work. Rather like now, we might talk of great singers of the past, Melba, Caruso. I want people in the next century to remember Sir Thomas Beecham, both by his own recordings, and by awarding scholarships in his name to promising young musicians who could not otherwise afford to develop their talents.

That, indeed, would be a fitting tribute to someone who considered himself a *musician* first, a conductor second.

Each new release in the Beecham Collection continues to shed light in unexpected areas. A case in point is CD 5, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* recorded in performance at Leeds Hall in 1937 with four of Britain's finest singers of the day, Isobel Baillie, Mary Jarred, Heddle Nash, and Keith Faulkner.

On more than one occasion, Sir Thomas publicly disparaged the German composer's achievements. Before conducting the Ninth, he remarked "very poorly orchestrated, but I've done my best with it." However, in Graham Melville-Mason's lucid notes for the *Missa Solemnis* discs, we learn that Beecham conducted "over 400 performances of Beethoven works (not including the recordings), of which by far the greater number are symphonies." His Beethoven performances were praised by the likes of both British and American critics Neville Cardus and Virgil Thomson. Beethoven authority Dr. Walter Riezler, present in the audience during the Leeds performance, was struck by the perfection of the choir. "Only at such a high level of technical proficiency could one begin to approach the spirit of this masterpiece," he declared.

How this remarkable artifact survived intact but unpublished for over half a century is a fascinating story.

When the music publishers Boosey & Hawkes's London office was demolished one night by German bombs during the blitz, it was Berta Geissmar, Sir Thomas's general secretary during the late 1930s and early 1940s who rushed to the scene in a cab, dug through the rubble and rescued not only the bulk of Sir Thomas's performing scores, but the test pressings of the Leeds performance, stored there for safekeeping. She entrusted them to the Beecham family where they remained for the next fifty years, before Sir Thomas's granddaughter made Keith Hardwick of EMI aware of their existence.

Miss Geissmar later wrote a book *The Jackboot and the Baton*, recalling her years as Wilhelm Furtwaengler's general secretary and afterwards Beecham's.

Without Berta Geissmar's quick action, the *Missa Solemnis* like nearly all of Sir Thomas's celebrated operatic productions would be just another Beecham event documented in words, not sound, with ever-changing descriptions tantalizing the imagination rather than the ears of future generations.

Already lost are Beecham's Covent *Ring* cycle recorded in performance by HMV on 35mm film stock, along with his Covent Garden productions of *Don Giovanni*

and *Elektra*. Nothing of his recorded broadcast performances of opera for the BBC appears to have survived either, although a thorough search could prove otherwise.

Beecham's lifelong devotion to music was matched by a near equal passion for literature. Not surprisingly, Byron was his favorite poet, and Beecham rarely travelled without a pocket edition of his poems. Beecham, like Byron, had an adventurous, unmistakably masculine personality. If Byron is a *man's* poet, Beecham is equally a *man's* conductor. Both were driven by strong desires, which to the outside world, verged on madness. Each wanted harmony in life above all, abhorred dissonance, but managed to create equal shares of both.

In 1956 Beecham staged Byron's verse play *Manfred* complete with Schumann's overture, supplemented by incidental music compiled and arranged by Beecham from other works by Schumann. That same year he recorded it for Columbia. Passed over for reissue by both CBS and EMI, Lady Beecham has made it available once more in the Beecham Collection, personally supervising the transfer to CD. Manfred's longing desire, voiced early in Act I, Scene II, speaks as much for Beecham as it does for Byron. It might well have been Sir Thomas's epitaph:

*Oh, that I were  
The viewless spirit of a lovely sound,  
A living voice, a breathing harmony,  
A bodiless enjoyment—born and dying  
With the blest tone which made me!*

## A Beecham CD Discography

### EMI Angel (Full Price)

Berlioz:	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i>	CDC 7 47863 2
	Overture "Le Corsaire" Op. 21	
	<i>Les Troyens</i> —Royal Hunt and Storm	
Bizet:	<i>Carmen</i>	CDS 7 49240 2
Bizet:	Symphony in C	CDC 7 47794 2
	<i>L'Arlesienne</i> —Suites Nos 1 & 2	
Delius:	The Complete Stereo Recordings	CDS 7 47509 8
Liszt:	A Faust Symphony	CDC 7 49260 2
Mozart:	Clarinet Concerto in A	CDC 7 47864 2
	Bassoon Concerto in B Flat	
	March in D (Haffner)	
	<i>Thamos, King of Egypt</i> —Entr'acte No. 2	
Puccini:	<i>La Boheme</i>	CDS 7 47235 8
Rimsky-Korsakov:	<i>Scheherazade</i>	CDC 7 47717 2
Borodin:	Polovtsian Dances	

### EMI Studio (Mid price)

Beethoven:	Symphony No. 2	CDM 7 69811 2
Mozart:	Symphony No. 41 "Jupiter"	
Beethoven:	Symphony No. 7	CDM 7 69871 2
	<i>The Ruins of Athens</i> —incidental music	
Brahms:	Symphony No. 2	CDM 7 63221 2
	Song of Destiny	
	Academic Festival Overture	
Grieg:	<i>Peer Gynt</i> —incidental music	CDM 7 69039 2
	Symphonic Dance, Op. 64, No. 2	
	Concert Overture "In Autumn" Op. 11	
Handel arr. Beecham:	<i>Love in Bath</i>	CDM 7 63374 2
	<i>The Gods Go A'Begging</i>	
	'Amaryllis' Suite (excerpts)	
	<i>The Great Elopement</i>	
Schubert:	Symphonies Nos. 3, 5, & 6	CDM 7 69750 2
Richard Strauss:	<i>Ein Heldenleben</i>	CDM 7 63299 2
Liszt:	<i>Orpheus</i>	
	Psalm 13	

### EMI Great Recordings of the Century (Mid Price)

Richard Strauss:	<i>Don Quixote</i> (w/ Paul Tortelier)	CDH 7 63106 2
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### EMI References (Mid Price)

Mozart:	Symphonies Nos. 29, 31, 34-36, 38-41	CHS 7 63698 2
Mozart:	Concerto for Flute & Harp	CDH 7 63820 2
	(w Rene le Roy, Lili Laskine)	
	Piano Concerto No. 12 (w Louis Kentner)	

	Violin Concerto No. 4 (w Jascha Heifetz)	
Mozart:	<i>Die Entführung aus dem Serail</i>	CHS 7 63715 2
Mozart:	<i>Die Zauberflöte</i>	CDH 7 61034 2
Sibelius:	Violin Concerto (w Jascha Heifetz)	CDH 7 64030 2
Wagner:	<i>Tristan und Isolde</i>	CHS 7 64037 2
<b>EMI Beecham Edition (Mid Price)</b>		
Balakirev:	Symphony No. 1 <i>Tamara</i>	CDM 7 63375 2
Bantock:	<i>Fifine at the Fair</i>	CDM 7 63405 2
Bax:	<i>The Garden of Fand</i>	
Berners:	<i>The Triumph of Neptune</i>	
Beethoven:	Mass in C <i>The Ruins of Athens</i>	CDM 7 64385 2
Beethoven:	Symphony No. 8	CDM 7 63398 2
Mendelssohn:	Symphony No. 4 " <i>Italian</i> "	
Schubert:	Symphony No. 8 " <i>Unfinished</i> "	
Berlioz:	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i> (1957)	CDM 7 64032 2
	<i>Le Roi Lear</i> —Grande ouverture Op. 4 (1947)	
	<i>Le Carneval romain</i> —Ouverture caracteristique Op. 9 (1936)	
Bizet:	<i>Carmen</i> —Suite No. 1	CDM 7 63379 2
Faure:	<i>Dolly Suite</i> —Pavane	
Delibes:	<i>Le Roi S'Amuse</i> —Ballet Music	
Debussy:	<i>Prelude a L'Apres-midi D'Un Faune</i>	
Delius:	Violin Concerto	CDM 7 64054 2
	Dance Rhapsody No. 1	
	The Song of the High Hills	
	On the Mountains (Paa vidderne)	
Delius:	<i>A Village Romeo &amp; Juliet</i>	CDM 7 64386 2
	Sea Drift (previously unpublished)	
Dvorak:	Symphony No. 8	CDM 7 63399 2
Sibelius:	Symphony No. 2	
Franck:	Symphony in D Minor	CDM 7 63396 2
Lalo:	Symphony espagnole for Violin & Orchestra, Op. 21	
Haydn:	"London" Symphonies Nos. 93-98	CMS 7 64389 2
Haydn:	"London" Symphonies Nos. 99-104	CMS 7 64066 2
Mozart:	Clarinet Concerto	CDM 7 63408 2
	Bassoon Concerto	
	Violin Concerto No. 3	
Sibelius:	<i>The Tempest</i> —incidental music	CDM 7 63397 2
	Finlandia	
	Karelia Suite—Intermezzo & Alla Marcia	
	Scenes Historiques Op. 66	
	Festivo	
Sibelius:	Symphony No. 4	CDM 7 64027 2
	Symphony No. 6	
	Lemminkainen's Return	
	The Bard	
	Prelude to <i>The Tempest</i>	



Sibelius:	Symphony No. 7 <i>Pelleas et Melisande</i> —incidental music Tapiola The Oceanides	CDM 7 63400 2
Tchiakovsky:	Symphony No. 4 <i>The Nutcracker</i> —Suite	CDM 7 63380 2
Various:	Lollipops	CDM 7 63412 2
Various:	Overtures	CDM 7 63407 2
Various:	Beecham in Rehearsal	CDM 7 64465 2
<b>The Beecham Collection (Mid Price)</b>		
Beethoven:	Symphony No. 2 Mass in C Major (Missa Solemnis)	BEECHAM 5
Delius:	Paris <i>Irmelin</i> —Prelude Eventyr <i>Fennimore &amp; Gerda</i> —Intermezzo Over the Hills and Far Away	BEECHAM 2
Delius:	Sea Drift (1936) Summer Night on the River In a Summer Garden Brigg Fair On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring Walk to the Paradise Garden La Calinda	BEECHAM 3
Schumann:	<i>Manfred</i>	BEECHAM 4
Tchaikovsky:	Overture—Fantasia " <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> " Symphony No. 3 " <i>Polish</i> "	BEECHAM 1
<b>RCA Victor Gold Seal (Mid Price)</b>		
Handel:	<i>Messiah</i>	09026-61266-2
Richard Straus:	<i>Don Quixote</i> (w Alfred Wallenstein)	09026-60929-2
<b>Sony Classical Masterworks Portrait (Mid Price)</b>		
Berlioz:	<i>Harold in Italy</i> (w William Primrose) <i>Le Roi Lear</i> , Op. 4 (1954) <i>Le Carneval romaine</i> , Op. 9 (1954)	MPK 47679
Delius:	<i>Hassan</i> —incidental music Sea Drift (1954) Arabesk	MPK 47680