



YSL 765 T Beecham Vol. 1

“Arturo Toscanini died on January 16, 1957, at the age of 89. One week later in New York, a memorial concert was held in Toscanini’s honor. Sir Thomas Beecham (1879-1961) conducted the Symphony of the Air (the NBC Symphony Orchestra, renamed after Toscanini’s retirement in 1954). The concert included a performance of the Brahms Third Symphony, the only recorded document of Beecham conducting the work. This background would, on its own, make the new St. Laurent Studio release (available from norpete.com) of the January 23, 1957 Toscanini Memorial Concert of great interest. But Beecham, ever fascinating, and ever the showman (and I mean that in the most complementary way), gives us so much more. The disc opens with a touching performance of Grieg’s ‘Last Spring’, an apt memorial offering. The Brahms Third follows. On November 4, 1952, Toscanini and the NBC SO made a studio recording of the work. The time difference between the two versions of the opening movement (both conductors observe the exposition repeat) is almost a full three minutes (10:52, 13:45). But while Toscanini was often known, and criticized by some, for his choice of fleet tempos, it is Beecham who conducts the Brahms Third at a blazing clip. The opening is quite something to hear. After the two opening chords, Beecham and the orchestra are off to the races. There is real ‘brio’ in this Allegro con brio! The musicians are with Beecham step for step, and the impact is electrifying. Beecham relaxes the pace for the lilting second theme, and applies some lovely rubato in the bargain. Beecham explores this kind of contrast throughout the movement. Brahms’ restless, surging transformation of the second theme at the start of the development section is given a hair-raising treatment. Beecham’s shouted exhortations to the orchestra, both here and elsewhere in the performance, raise the emotional stakes even further. For all the speed and intensity of this rendition of the opening movement, Beecham is masterful in capturing the mystical beauty of the closing measures.

Beecham is approximately one minute faster than Toscanini in each of the remaining three movements (I point that out for what it’s worth, which is probably not all that much). Beecham, who presided over magical wind

playing by his Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, coaxes a beautiful performance from the Symphony of the Air winds in the second movement. The third movement has a lovely singing quality throughout, and a tasteful, enticing use of string portamento. The finale returns us to the hyper-dramatic approach of the opening movement, with Beecham once again in full-throated support of the musicians. For all the pervasive storm and stress, the Symphony's concluding measures provide a heavenly apotheosis. No doubt, some will find Beecham's approach to the outer movements of the Brahms Third exaggerated, perhaps overwrought. But the commitment Beecham and the musicians bring to the performance makes it a one of a kind experience. The concert concludes with a Beecham trademark, the Trojan March from Berlioz's opera LES TROYENS. Beecham urges the orchestra onward (both with baton and voice) to a glorious performance, greatly appreciated by the audience (the only applause included on the release).

The recorded sound on the St. Laurent Studio restoration is typical of radio broadcasts of the period. There is some congestion in louder passages, but the detail, orchestral color, and dynamic range are far more than adequate to enjoy the historic occasion. No liner notes - just track listings, performers, and the concert's purpose and date. I think that anyone interested in the Brahms Third and/or the artistry of Thomas Beecham will want to hear this disc. Sir Thomas was one of a kind, as this release attests. Enthusiastically recommended."

- Ken Meltzer, FANFARE