

# BOX-SET *Round-up*

**Rob Cowan** dips into conductor collections devoted to three larger-than-life personalities

I've some pretty special collections for you this month, the first needing little in the way of detailed critical comment (in general) but an urgent recommendation. To this day **Thomas Beecham** has his fans and his detractors, largely because his outsized musical personality ranged from exquisite delicacy (much of his incomparable Delius) to characterful but occasionally portentous Haydn, here represented by *The Seasons* (with soprano Elsie Morison and tenor Alexander Young captured in their vocal prime) and deliciously pointed accounts of the Symphonies Nos 99-104, stereo recordings (the terrain covered by this fine-sounding collection), the earlier 'London' Symphonies having been recorded by Beecham in mono only. Who but Beecham could make the first movement of Balakirev's First Symphony sound so meaningfully argumentative or Liszt's *Faust Symphony* (again with Young in fine voice) so vividly reflective of its three 'character portrayals'? For this single-disc reissue Beecham's emotively potent account of the tone poem *Orpheus* is added, bringing the disc's playing time well over the 80-minute mark.

One of the glories of this set is the playing of Beecham's hand-picked Royal Philharmonic, an elite instrumental amalgam that approximates in its effect augmented chamber music of the first order. Works such as selected Schubert symphonies (Nos 3, 5 and 6), Symphonies by Lalo, Bizet, Mozart (the most expressive account of the *Jupiter* you're ever likely to hear) and Beethoven (a dancing Seventh and a textually observant Second – note the keenly played accents in the Trio of the Minuet), as well as Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, Rimsky's *Sheherazade*, the delightful Handel arrangements (especially the 'orchestral suite' *Love in Bath*, with its cameo reference to the *Largo* near the close and a Hornpipe that blasts 'Rule, Britannia!'), extended excerpts from *Solomon* (with Morison, Young and John Cameron), not to mention Bizet's *Carmen* with Victoria de los Angeles and Nicolai Gedda, deliciously turned if without the fire that keeps André Cluytens's 1950 Paris version with Solange Michel and Raoul Jobin on a front burner (Naxos), Mozart's colourful Singspiel *Die Entführung aus*



*dem Serail* (with bass Gottlob Frick on cracking form) and numerous Beecham 'lollipops' give you some idea of what a generous box of goodies this is. Beecham's music-making was primarily about love – love not only for the music but also of the performers and his audiences, which makes for magical listening. Also included, fascinating if spatially limited experimental stereo recordings from the pre-war era (LPO) and rehearsal fragments.

Beecham was a recreative musician, primarily via his many arrangements and (mostly Handelian) reorchestrations, whereas the Finnish maestro **Leif Segerstam** outstripped Beecham's adored Joseph Haydn more than three times over on the symphonic front. Segerstam's symphonic output exceeded the 350 mark, but when it comes to music by other composers his many recordings attest to a rare sense of inner perception. 'Segerstam in Aarhus' (where he played a major conductorial role between 2018 and 2022) sheds illumination on some significant symphonic music. His unfolding of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony climaxes with two cymbal clashes in the second-movement *Adagio* whereas the prominent Wagner tubas near the end of that same movement have rarely made such a strong impression, certainly not on disc. When it comes to Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, the performance's highlight is undoubtedly the finale, which assumes a level of grandeur reminiscent of Celibidache in Munich. Possibly the set's most interesting disc is the third, which follows the thrilling midway point in Smetana's *Má vlast* – 'Šárka' – with often theatrical music by the Danish composer Rued Langgaard, his highly original Fifth Symphony, *Nature of the Steppes* ('Summer Legend Drama') in its second version, where Segerstam's involvement with this gripping 22-minute score is palpable. 'Šárka' follows on from the first two movements of *Má vlast* (the rest is not included, at least not as part of the present programme) but it's a fascinating interpretation, fiery to start

with, though the latter sections of the score are slower than usual. Likewise the opening tone poem 'Vyšehrad', which runs to 17'24" (Václav Talich and the Czech PO in 1954 – Supraphon, Naxos – clock up a more urgent 14'10"). Segerstam's view of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony again chooses a leisurely route, the avian clarinet at the close of the 'Scene by the Brook' tweaked appropriately notation-wise. This is thoughtful music-making, with plenty of interpretative ideas to get your teeth into, well played and agreeably recorded. Let's hope there's more to come from the same source.

Beecham and Segerstam tended to venture, metaphorically speaking, between the staves, whereas **Herbert von Karajan** was essentially a master of sound whose performances and recordings were visited by textural beauty and/or drama. Karajan recorded Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* initially with the Philharmonia, drawing praise in these pages (4/55) with the words 'the orchestral playing and recording alike are superb'. Meloclassic's release of an August live recording from the 1954 Lucerne Festival is similarly endowed, with an extra degree of spontaneity added. The same concert includes Strauss's *Don Juan*, also available as recorded on tour in Turin a couple of months later (Urania). Karajan's way of unleashing the score's passion holds the attention from start to finish and the Philharmonia's playing is magnificent. More interesting still, from the same Lucerne concert, is Mozart's Concerto No 23 in A, K488, with that seasoned Mozartian Walter Giesecking as soloist, studio-recorded by these artists earlier but with an extra degree of fizz and infinitely better sound on this new live version. Immaculately pronounced radio announcements (in German, French and Italian) are separately tracked, and therefore easily dispensable. **G**

## THE RECORDINGS

### Complete Stereo Recordings on

**Warner Classics Thomas Beecham**

Warner Classics (35 CDs) 2173 24089-1

### Segerstam in Aarhus Leif Segerstam

Danacord ④ DACOCD941/4

### The Lucerne Concert 1954

**Walter Giesecking, Herbert von Karajan**

Meloclassic ② MC5007