

# Amateur of Genius

R J Stove



**Thomas Beecham: An Obsession with Music**, John Lucas, Boydell Press, 2008, £25.

Twenty-five years ago this engrossing book, one of the best about any British musician, could never have been published. The mid-1980s represented the new dawn of the Compact Disc, whose makers were then afflicted with a neophilia (to use Christopher Lasch's inspired coinage) unimaginable today. Anyone who, a quarter of a century back, had predicted that CDs would ultimately achieve their main musical value as storehouses of pre-1980s performances would have been considered insane. By unhappy chance, this neophilia coincided with the nadir of modern Anglo-American musicology, which at this stage was dominated by what Chesterton vividly called 'a mere anarchist itch to upset a traditional and universal verdict.' Almost no biographies of distinguished past performers could then appear at all, except those which poured ridicule on the very notion of a past performer being distinguished. Joseph Horowitz's misleadingly titled diatribe *Understanding Toscanini* (1987) embodied the genre at its worst: glib reductionism redolent of Lytton Strachey, combined with pompous Marxism deriving directly from Theodor Adorno.

Fortunately the use to which the CD has since been put differs in almost every respect from what its original manufacturers had in mind. While new full-price classical releases from the major labels have slowed to a trickle, reissues from the archives abound, and have made possible (for those who take advantage of them) a life-enhancing depth of perspective on musical history. In no area of musical effort has this

enrichment been more obvious than in the recent rediscovery of eminent pre-modern conductors. Bored to sobs by the egalitarian, consensus-crazed blandness of most figures on the podium in our own time, a fairly small but diligent category of collectors around the world avidly seeks out gramophonic evidence of tougher and more courageous musical leaders from past generations. Never has it been so easy to acquire on disc a good cross-section of recordings by Toscanini, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Leopold Stokowski, Guido Cantelli, Dmitri Mitropoulos, Hans Knappertsbusch ... and, Sir Thomas Beecham, who died in 1961 after a career that began in Queen Victoria's reign.

John Lucas's industry has been amazing. As raconteur, Beecham, like Pooh-Bah, adored adding 'corroborative detail... to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.' *A Mingled Chime*, his 1943 memoir, constitutes a small masterpiece of witty musing undisturbed by the slightest self-revelation, let alone chronological precision. His critic friend Neville Cardus later produced what purported to be a serious biography, only to weigh it down with anecdotes that Cardus had invented himself. It does Lucas credit that the Beecham who emerges from the present work proves a more, rather than a less, fascinating figure than the mere wisecracking automaton which Cardus — and, afterwards, Cardus's journalistic inferiors — popularised. If anything, it does Lucas still more credit that the mysteries of Beecham's gifts endure, even after being subjected to the acetylene flame of scholarship.

How did Beecham (born 1879) learn conducting,

and how did he learn to use the English language much more elegantly than most people ever manage to do? He maintained a comprehensive reticence about these topics, and so covered his tracks as to enforce a similar reticence upon subsequent chroniclers. He obtained almost nothing from what little formal education he had. He took some private lessons in orchestration, counterpoint, and the piano, all of the most desultory, inconclusive kind. His undergraduate period at Wadham College, Oxford, was academically null. Eventually the college's Warden assured him (with a certain orotundity of phrasing which is itself rather Beechamesque) that 'Your untimely departure has perhaps spared us the necessity of asking you to go.' There had been no ancestral tradition of either musical or literary interests. The family owed its fortune to having invented Beecham's Pills, a laxative fantastically popular from the 1840s onwards. An advertising jingle ran 'Hark! The herald-angels sing / Beecham's Pills are just the thing'; Lucas denies the frequent allegation that young Thomas wrote it, but it sounds like the sort of thing he could well have written.

Then, suddenly, in 1899, Beecham discovered what he had been put on earth to do: conduct. When he faced down orchestral players, his pedagogical lacunae no longer mattered. Henceforth he remained a driven man, obsessed with music, as Lucas's subtitle emphasises. At the same time his inherent amateurism marked him out from German, Austrian, and Italian maestri, who in youth had paid their dues by acquiring large repertoires in opera houses (before World War I on the Continent, the idea of a non-theatrical conductor was almost oxymoronic). In some respects Beecham's *modus operandi* stayed fallible. *New York Times* correspondent Olin Downes analysed the Beecham approach:

Judged by the highest standards of conducting, his technic [*sic*], if such it can be called, and his style are precise examples, at least to the casual glance, of what a conductor should not do ... He may indicate a sforzando [sudden accent] in the manner of a man hurling a brick or a bomb at a foe, or beat the measure freely with one arm while holding the baton in a clenched fist, invisible to the orchestra, at his back. It remains that the orchestra understands him, and that

singularly inspired music floods torrentially and with precision from him and the instrumentalists.

His score-reading ability coped unflustered with the most complex inspirations of Wagner, Stravinsky, and Richard Strauss. (Lucas quotes a memorably inane attack on Strauss's *Elektra* by Wagner's biographer Ernest Newman: 'Is, then, the opera worthless? I make bold to say that quite half of it is, and that few will want to hear this half more than once or twice.') Many a better-schooled orchestral director than Beecham has floundered badly in Delius; Beecham became Delius's most passionate and idiomatic advocate.

Nor did Delius exhaust Beecham's enthusiasm for his compatriots. Elgar's output irked him, and he never performed it with any joy. Nevertheless, before the age of thirty Beecham had led the world premieres of compositions by Vaughan Williams, as well as by other figures once considered Vaughan Williams's peers, such as Ethel Smyth, Cyril Scott (whom his original admirers called 'the English Debussy', as Lucas observes), Josef Holbrooke, Charles Wood, and Granville Bantock. Later he gave a jocularly sympathetic ear to the young William Walton, urging him to amplify the orchestration of his oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*: 'As you'll never hear the thing again, my boy, why not throw in a couple of brass bands?' Such a background

inoculated Beecham in old age against the myth so widespread after 1945 — on ideological and sexual rather than on artistic grounds — that the history of worthwhile English music began only with Benjamin Britten.

Delius aside, Beecham lavished his firmest affections on Handel and on the French repertory. He felt at home with French music in a way that few other English interpreters ever are. Berlioz's initial popularity in Britain owed more to Beecham than to anyone else; Beecham even championed the Berlioz works previously and ignorantly condemned as white elephants, such as *Les Troyens*. Manifesting either a rush of blood to the head or (more probably) a deliberate tease, Beecham insisted that he would trade all of Bach's Brandenburg Concerti for Massenet's opera *Manon*, 'and consider that I had profited vastly by the exchange.' (Elsewhere Beecham airily dismissed Bach for perpetrating 'counterpoint — and, what is worse, Protestant counterpoint.') Among obscure French



composers, André Grétry, Etienne-Nicolas Méhul, and the only slightly better remembered (in Beecham's youth) Jean-Philippe Rameau often turned up on Beecham's programmes, and on his alone. He had what few rivals, even the finest, possessed: a determination to tackle only material which he liked. If masterpieces bored him — as several of Beethoven's and Brahms's did — he said so, and usually avoided them. He can be faulted for lack of imaginative sympathy, but at least his candour spared the world a great many tedious and insincere performances.

Hedonism being the key to Beecham's art, it followed that he would enjoy a special success in opera. What made his operatic ventures at Covent Garden and other theatres even more extraordinary than their dominant vocal and instrumental excellence was that he financed them from his own pocket. 'Some men spend their money on horses, some on yachts. I go in for music,' he informed an American reporter. The resultant perils — including the threat of bankruptcy — he accepted in good part, without whining, indeed with positive relish. Little wonder that he identified with the similarly risk-taking and munificent Handel. It all amounted to the most benevolent musical despotism London had seen since Handel's own years of triumph. Consequently, when successive post-1945 governments carried out their programme of turning music into merely one more department of the Servile State, Beecham resisted them with all his considerable articulacy and shrewdness. He realised from the early days of welfarism that a society of free men and women has no more need for a Ministry of Arts than it has for a Ministry of Truth; that it is immoral to make the ninety per cent of citizens who are not remotely interested in high culture subsidise the ten per cent who are; that any arts apparatus bosses will differ from Goebbels and Zhdanov only in degree, not in kind; and that trying to dragoon the masses' tastes in classical music leads invariably to the sort of power-mania epitomised by the old joke about the soapbox Bolshevik:

SOAPBOX BOLSHEVIK: Come the revolution, you'll all have caviar!

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: But I don't like caviar!

SOAPBOX BOLSHEVIK: Come the revolution, you'll all like caviar!

It would be pleasing to imply that the thought processes of the Conservative Party, six decades later, had managed to catch up with Beecham. Pleasing, but false.

The most valuable of all Lucas's chapters deal with Beecham's numerous foreign travels, including those to Germany, Australia, Canada, and the USA. (It gives the mere reviewer a sadistic thrill to point out a secondary

source that appears to have eluded even Lucas's meticulous researches: *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, by Roger Covell [Sun Books, Melbourne, 1967], which includes commentary on Sir Thomas's antipodean visit.) Whether abroad or at home, Beecham seldom varied his rehearsal methods, which consisted in about equal portions of chaffing and businesslike efficiency. To the exuberance of a Wooster, he added the omniscience of a Jeeves. Unpredictable instructions would keep musicians on their toes: the composer Eric Coates recalled Beecham as preceding a performance with the imperious command 'Now, gentlemen, do your worst!' On the rare occasions when these strategies failed him, he could disconcert troublemakers by what American record producer Charles O'Connell called '[his] exophthalmic leer'. Lucas's publishers generously supply a CD containing various Beecham practice sessions. Broadcasting administrator William G James — creator, incidentally, of some delightful Christmas carols — witnessed Beecham direct in 1940 the Queensland Symphony Orchestra (which Lucas, through an utterly atypical lapse, misidentifies as 'Brisbane Symphony Orchestra'), and found the outcome most impressive:

He gave the players confidence. He didn't try to get impossibilities out of them. He told me that his method of conducting was to "give them their heads" from the first rehearsal. Then he decided what standard of work he could obtain from them, and worked for that. "If I can get higher", he said, "well and good".

*Mutatis mutandis*, Beecham used elsewhere the same methods to which he treated the Queenslanders. With the unglamorous chores of sustained orchestra-building — such as Sir John Barbirolli carried out in Manchester, Sir Georg Solti in Chicago, Stokowski in Philadelphia, and the incomparable George Szell in Cleveland — Beecham did not concern himself. His special genius lay in making second-rate and third-rate ensembles sound like first-rate ones when, and solely when, he directed them. Ensembles already first-rate could now and then make him stumble badly, as when he led Amsterdam's Concertgebouw band.

Unpropitious though particular times have been for Beecham's posthumous reputation, some of his recorded legacy has almost always been in print. If Lucas's study has a shortcoming, it is that he devotes less space to his subject's records than could have been wished. (A fully annotated discography, such as is now standard procedure with American biographies of important executants, would have helped.) Unlike Klemperer, whose vivacity and breadth of musical comprehension were blatantly misrepresented by the repertoire — and, too often, the style — of his later

recordings, Beecham retained in the 1950s much the same attitude that he had brought to the studio in the 1920s and 1930s. Most spectacular of his studio offerings is his 1959 *Messiah*, using a re-orchestration by Sir Eugene Goossens so convoluted, so gaudy, and so anachronistic — harps, cymbals and triangles in every direction — that it makes Stokowski's Bach transcriptions seem like the epitome of asceticism. The result indicates how many years have elapsed since Beecham dwelt among us: no living maestro would dare thus to thumb his nose at musicologists en bloc, however robust his private disrespect for them. In this respect, although in no other, Beecham seems to inhabit an unimaginably distant past. Paradoxically, Lucas has

stressed Beecham's importance to the present, so that Sir Thomas veritably leaps off the page, brisk, raffish, goateed, the grand seigneur of his profession. Many another conductor surpassed Beecham in depth and spiritual insight; no conductor surpassed him in his capacity for having and generating fun. His demise, no less than that of David Garrick as described by Dr Johnson, 'eclipsed the gaiety of nations, and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasure.'

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