

SOMM
RECORDINGS



GEORGE SZELL IN NEW YORK VOL. 1

FRANCK

Symphony in D minor

SIBELIUS

Symphony No. 2

PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK





"I AM SO DAMN NORMAL..." For those of us who have come to know the legend of George Szell these words seem very much out of character. I would guess the members of the Cleveland Orchestra who knew him would say as much. But this is the way he saw himself, or how he wanted to be seen by the American public in 1944. He had just finished his second season as conductor of German repertoire at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and *Time* magazine, who called his conducting "remarkable in its power and drama", quoted him as saying: "There is nothing interesting about me. I have no hobbies. I am not melancholy. My accounts are all in perfect order. I am so damn normal." *Normal?... indeed.*

In 1939 when Szell and his wife, Helene, departed Scotland for his second series of engagements with the Australian Broadcasting Company, he was wary enough of the worsening European political climate that he took his complete music library with him. He was not willing to risk losing what he said "represented years of my life, entire summers given to the study of scores and the careful annotation of orchestral material". This proved to be prescient because, instead of returning to Glasgow – where he was conductor of the Scottish Orchestra (now the Royal Scottish National Orchestra), having replaced Sir John Barbiroli who had surprisingly left for New York and the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra in 1936 – they sailed east on the *Aorangi* to Vancouver, Canada, deciding to wait out the war in the United States.

This was not the first time Szell was headed for America. In 1930, at the age of 33, he had debuted there with the St. Louis Symphony and was a candidate, along with Vladimir Golschmann, for the orchestra's vacant conducting post. However, even a return engagement the following year did not result in Szell being offered the position, which went to Golschmann instead.

After taking up his post in Scotland, Szell also guest-conducted The Residentie Orchestra across the English Channel in The Hague, where a favourable meeting with Arturo Toscanini in 1938 resulted in an invitation to conduct his NBC Symphony Orchestra the following year, which Szell had to decline because of prior commitments in Australia. (While in Glasgow and before his marriage to Helene in 1938, he proposed marriage, surprisingly and unsuccessfully, to the orchestra's principal oboist, Evelyn Rothwell, later Lady Barbirolli – as told to the author in 2001.)

The Szells arrived in New York in October 1939, staying initially with Czech friends on Park Avenue. Ever the workaholic, Szell now found himself in the unusual position of having no work. He took advantage of his time off to orchestrate Weber's *Perpetuum mobile* and Smetana's String Quartet No.1 "From My Life". He had been pondering a transcription of the Smetana quartet for many years, and once it was finished it became a calling card, along with Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*, when offers to guest-conduct began arriving. He also found teaching positions at the Mannes School of Music (instrumentation, composition and advanced theory) and the New School for Social Research, and he played chamber music with friends he knew as soloists with his orchestras in Europe: Adolf Busch, Emanuel Feuermann, Zino Francescatti, Erica Morini and Joseph Szigeti, among others.

His first American conducting offer came from Los Angeles and the LA Philharmonic, and on 16 August 1940 he conducted his Weber transcription along with Smetana's Overture to *The Bartered Bride*, Beethoven's *Leonore* Overture No.3, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* plus *Fêtes* and *Nocturnes*, and the Tchaikovsky "Pathétique" at the Hollywood Bowl. Critics were divided: the *Los Angeles Times* remarked, "He is a martinet," while the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express* found that "he had taken an unforgettable grip upon our musical consciousness" with Tchaikovsky's Sixth.

Back in New York, he went to Toscanini to inform him that he was now available to conduct his orchestra, only to be told that the NBC season had already been booked. He was offered four engagements in 1941 instead, and in his first concert he conducted, without scores, Schumann's Symphony No.4, Haydn's Symphony No.97 and *Till Eulenspiegel*. Noel Straus, reviewing in the *New York Times*, noted that "Here was conducting characterized by a firm, incisive beat, of remarkable precision, almost military at times in its sharp accentuation, and marked by clean, clear articulation of phrases ... Szell established himself as a conductor of truly distinguished abilities."

Even after a near-disastrous rehearsal (of Beethoven's *Eroica*) for his second concert with the NBC, he continued to receive guest-conducting offers from around the country. The reason for the fraught *Eroica* rehearsal was Szell's continually stopping the orchestra in what was surely a work familiar to everyone – over 50 times in the second movement alone. Toscanini, who happened to be in the hall, became enraged – "It's an insult to me!" At intermission the Italian conductor could be heard berating Szell for wearing out his orchestra. To Szell's credit, but probably due more to self-preservation, he wrote Toscanini a conciliatory letter ("*Illustrissimo Maestro*") that same day. The NBC orchestra invited him back to guest-conduct in the following year, but that was only after Toscanini had resigned for the 1941–42 season. Szell did not conduct the NBC orchestra again after 1942.

Szell's star began its rapid rise in New York with his engagement as conductor at the Metropolitan Opera in 1942, having been on their radar as early as 1926 while an assistant to Richard Strauss in Berlin. His first production at the Met was Strauss's *Salome*, a work he had first conducted in 1925 at the Berlin State Opera. Olin Downes in the *New York Times* wrote, "It was clear as soon as he started that Mr. Szell had the score secure in his brain and his hand, that he was reading it with authority and a true sense of the theatre". Virgil Thomson, never one to be out-and-out enthusiastic, remarked, "So vigorous an hour and a half of musical experience is not to be met with every week".

Szell was not one to be idle. A not atypical month at the Met would see him conduct *Die Walküre*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Siegfried*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Götterdämmerung* all in the space of two weeks. In his four years at the Met (1942 until 1946, when he assumed his post in Cleveland), he conducted 85 performances of 11 operas.

Szell now fell into a routine of opera in New York from November to May and orchestra festivals in the summer. Then, on the Fourth of July 1943 he made his debut with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York (it was not until 1957 that its present name was adopted) in its new Sunday summer series at Carnegie Hall. He conducted *The Star-Spangled Banner*, Beethoven's Symphony No.7, Smetana's *The Moldau*, Wagner's Overture to *Tannhäuser* and, to mark the auspicious day, Sousa's *The Stars and Stripes Forever*.

In 1951 Columbia records signed Szell to a recording contract with the Philharmonic that extended to 1954 and resulted in three LP releases featuring his core repertoire – Smetana, Wagner, Mendelssohn, Beethoven – and a fourth LP, as a pension fund release, containing the Tchaikovsky *Rococo Variations* (with the orchestra's principal cellist, Leonard Rose) and the Weber overtures to *Oberon* and *Der Freischütz*. This would be the extent of his commercial recording with the Philharmonic.

After Szell's appointment to the Cleveland Orchestra in 1946 he was still spending significant time in New York. In 1951 rumours began circulating that his time in Cleveland was merely a stepping stone and that he would bolt for the Philharmonic (as had been the case with Rodziński who had been appointed Music Director in 1943, also coming from Cleveland) or for the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, with which he was enjoying an increasingly close relationship. (One wonders how welcoming the Dutch orchestra's reception to such an appointment would have been: they called a rehearsal with Szell "Szell-straft", a pun on the Dutch word *celstraf*, meaning solitary confinement.)

Time magazine reported, "To judge by the enthusiasm of critics and audiences, he could probably land himself an even more impressive berth than the one he has." To allay any fears, Szell told the Cleveland press, "I have no intention of leaving Cleveland". The contract he signed in Cleveland for the years 1953–56 dispelled any further rumours of him leaving for the Philharmonic. With the total control he was given of the Cleveland Orchestra, he knew he had an opportunity to create "an instrument that perfectly reflects my musical ideals", something he realised would probably not have been possible in New York.

1954 saw Szell's abrupt resignation from the Metropolitan Opera due to differences with Met General Manager Rudolf Bing. His resignation, cryptically citing "present conditions", was announced in the press after the third of four performances of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in January. The crux of the matter centred on artistic control of productions, and with two strong personalities, each unwilling to relinquish anything, matters were bound to come to a head. Thus ended Szell's 12-year association with an organization that gave him his first big opportunity in America.

1955 saw the beginning of a lapse in Szell's Philharmonic performances, a period that lasted for six years. His association with the Philharmonic was to last for 27 years and would see him develop a close relationship with the orchestra both at subscription concerts and on tour. When Leonard Bernstein announced his retirement in 1969, Szell was named Music Advisor and Senior Guest Conductor and tasked with guiding the orchestra through the process of selecting Bernstein's successor.

The two works on this album represent opposite ends of Szell's repertoire. The **Franck Symphony in D minor** is not a work usually associated with Szell's core repertoire, but in fact he conducted it over 20 times in the US, the first time on 30 October 1947 in Cleveland, and the last time on 6 April 1970 with the Philharmonic in New York. The first time he conducted

it with the Philharmonic was on 28 February 1948. Unfortunately there are no reviews of the performance on this disc because the *New York Times* was on strike that week.

Considering that Sibelius's Second Symphony is regarded today as the composer's most popular, it's surprising that Szell didn't conduct it in the US until 24 January 1952 in Cleveland, having conducted Symphonies 3, 5 and 7 multiple times before. After that first concert, he made the Second a staple of his programmes, performing it again more than 60 times.

Szell conducted the **Sibelius Symphony No.2 in D major** in Carnegie Hall on 15 and 16 January 1953, and again on the 18th whence this broadcast originates. Harold C. Schonberg commented in the *New York Times* that it was a "powerful, dramatic reading ... conducted with complete belief in the music and with a flexibility that kept it from ever falling into a four-square pattern. [Szell's] balances, too, were well considered, all leading to a rich texture of tone."

When listening to these recordings it becomes obvious that the Philharmonic was, at this time, a superior orchestra, top to bottom, to what Szell was in the process of building in Cleveland. There's a weight and muscularity that is missing from recordings in Cleveland from the same time period (see *George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra: The Forgotten Recordings*, SOMM Ariadne 5011-2). However, the instrument he ultimately built in Cleveland would, in the minds of many, never be equalled for its disciplined execution, unparalleled clarity and unanimity of phrasing. After the conductor's death on 30 July 1970, Myron Bloom, the orchestra's great principal horn, remarked that Szell was "the last of the great aristocrats among conductors".

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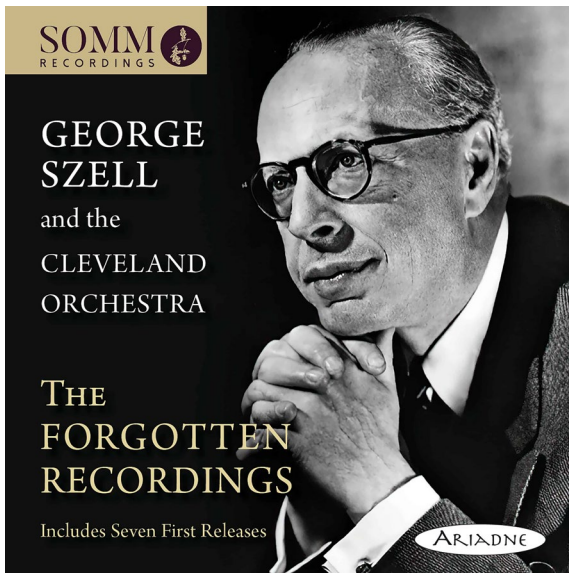
LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer, lecturer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* (“There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – ‘historic’ – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This set is both.”), *BBC Radio 3*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *Fanfare*, *The Sunday Times*, *MusicWeb International*, *Diapason*, *Classical Source*, *International Record Review*, and many others.

In 2016, BBC Radio 3 presented an hour-long documentary about his stereo reconstructions for *Elgar Remastered* (SOMMCD 261-4). In addition to his close collaboration with SOMM, which has produced several critically acclaimed recordings, his work can be heard on Music & Arts, West Hill Radio Archive, Naxos, Boston Records, and Oboe Classics, and he has worked for Sony/France on historic restorations of the recordings of George Szell. In 2020, he was awarded an Honorary Membership of the Elgar Society for his work on the recorded legacy of Sir Edward Elgar.

Formerly a leading performer on period oboes in the US, he was a member of Boston Baroque and the Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra of Boston. In addition, he has appeared with many of North America’s leading period instrument orchestras, including Tafelmusik, Philharmonia Baroque, Tempesta di Mare, Apollo’s Fire, Washington Bach Consort, the American Classical Orchestra, Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra, Mercury Baroque and many others.

Also a modern oboist, he was the principal oboist of the Colorado Springs Symphony Orchestra, the Colorado Opera Festival, the American Chamber Winds, and the Maine Chamber Ensemble and made his European solo debut in 1999 playing John McCabe's Oboe Concerto with the Hitchin Symphony Orchestra in England.

He has served on the faculties of Colorado College, Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire), and the University of New Hampshire Chamber Music Institute. He has toured throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East on period and modern oboes and has recorded for Telarc, Linn, Koch, Naxos, Vox, MusicMasters, L'Oiseau-Lyre, and Musica Omnia.



George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra: The Forgotten Recordings

SOMM ARIADNE 5011-2

Gramophone Editor's Choice for Re-issues/Archives (June 2021)

BBC Music Magazine Historical Critic's Choice (June 2021)

Diapason d'Or (July/August 2021)

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MONO

GEORGE SZELL

IN NEW YORK VOL. 1

PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK

César Franck (1822–1890)

Symphony in D minor ^a [37:30]

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|-------|
| [1] | I. Lento – Allegro non troppo | 18:07 |
| [2] | II. Allegretto | 9:50 |
| [3] | III. Finale: Allegro non troppo | 9:31 |

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.43 ^b [40:10]

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------|-------|
| [4] | I. Allegretto | 8:59 |
| [5] | II. Tempo andante, ma rubato | 12:40 |
| [6] | III. Vivacissimo – | 5:08 |
| [7] | IV. Finale: Allegro moderato | 13:21 |

Total duration: **77:48**

Recording (LIVE): Carnegie Hall, New York,

^b 18 January & ^a 6 December 1953

(CBS Radio aircheck)

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