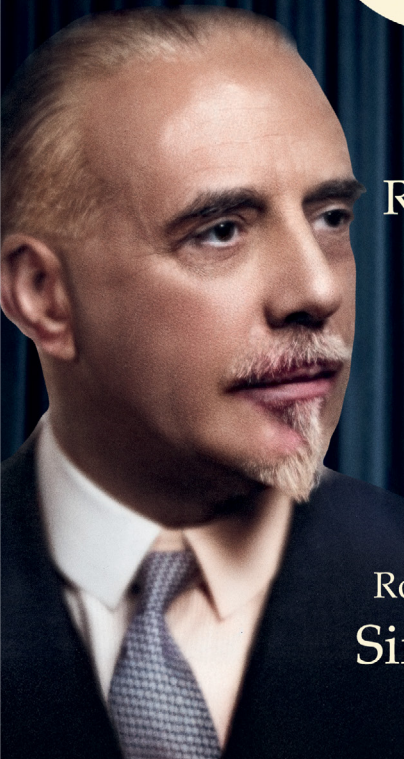


**SOMM**  
RECORDINGS



**THE BEECHAM  
COLLECTION**

*Live recordings*



**RIMSKY-KORSAKOV**

Scheherazade

**SAINT-SAËNS**

Bacchanale

Cello Concerto No.1

Mischel Cherniavsky

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

**Sir Thomas Beecham**

## BEECHAM'S SCHEHERAZADE – LIVE

Sir Thomas Beecham's famous studio recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* was made at Kingsway Hall on 17–19 and 28 March 1957. The live performance on this release was given at the Royal Festival Hall on 21 March – in other words, right in the middle of the studio sessions. That goes some way to explaining the glorious quality of the playing in the concert – the orchestra had been immersed in the piece for three days – with Steven Staryk as the excellent solo violinist in both the live and studio versions. But the subtle differences are striking too. For anybody who has found places in the studio version – particularly in the first movement, “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship” – where the playing feels more polished than thrilling, the rhythms accurately placed rather than exciting, this concert performance comes as a revelation. It’s no accident that the playing time for the live account of the first movement is nearly a minute quicker than the studio version: everything has a more urgent edge to it, and the presence of an audience means that the playing and conducting are at a consistently higher temperature.

It’s also worth putting this performance in the wider context of London’s concert life at the time. In the same week of March 1957, London’s concertgoers were treated to an extraordinarily rich programme. At the Festival Hall alone, on 20 March – the night before Beecham’s concert – Lisa Della Casa sang Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*; on 22 and 25 March Klemperer conducted all-Mozart and all-Beethoven concerts with the Philharmonia; on 24 March Della Casa gave a solo recital with Gerald Moore; and on 26 and 29 March Eduard van Beinum conducted two programmes with the visiting Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra (Mendelssohn, Vermeulen and Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique* in the first; Haydn, Debussy and Brahms in the second). North of the river, in St Pancras Town Hall on 19 and 20 March, Handel’s *Alcina* was given by the Handel Opera Society with a cast led by Joan Sutherland. In short, it was quite a week, but even among these riches, Beecham’s *Scheherazade* stood out.

According to the unnamed critic for *The Times*, Beecham's performance was "beautiful in two senses. One to be expected was that every colour in the exotic score, every episode in the narrative, was finely drawn and shaped to the last nicety – and here the solo playing of the new leader, Mr Steven Staryk, must have due acknowledgment. The other was the extraordinary feeling of narrative – we were being told stories; if the music is repetitious, so are all good folk-tales ... The effect was quite mesmeric." Under the headline "The Beecham Touch", John Warrack in the *Daily Telegraph* was clearly enchanted: "Sir Thomas Beecham's genius for conjuring playing of unique excitement was generously displayed at last night's Festival Hall concert. In Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* ... he allowed the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's soloists a freer hand than most conductors would dare. Yet the discipline of the attack, the sustained splendour of tone in the loudest passages, was never less than superb. The violin solo was beautifully played by Steven Staryk."

Those reports are confirmed by listening to this remarkable performance. The only reservation Andrew Porter had about the studio recording when it appeared a year later was that the first movement lacked "dynamism", adding that "Beecham seems to have in mind the broad marine swell over which Sinbad's ship is sailing." That's an acute observation, and in the live performance – with just a little more forward momentum, it is exactly that dynamism which comes through so compellingly: a sense of Sinbad's ship cresting the waves with heroic energy. The same expressive intensity marks out the rest of this performance. "The Story of the Kalendar Prince" opens with lovely solo work from Staryk and the principal oboe and bassoon (Terence MacDonagh and Gwydion Brooke). Beecham then unleashes a series of brilliantly characterised episodes, all of them delivered with marvellous panache, including some electrifying brass playing and a gorgeous clarinet cadenza (Jack Brymer). But really every section of the orchestra shines in this movement – and they do so with the kind of breathtaking conviction that only comes from having a live audience. And, as the critic for *The Times* noted, the sense of narrative – of musical

story-telling – is extraordinarily keen. In the third movement, “The Young Prince and the Young Princess”, the RPO strings are at their most ardent. Again, it is fascinating to contrast this with the studio recording. In that, the opening has a chaste beauty that is undeniably effective, but it has far less expressive conviction than in the concert. For their Festival Hall audience, Beecham and his orchestra wear their hearts on their sleeves – a very different experience from the patient crafting of making a recording that was intended to endure for decades (it’s never been out of print since its original release). Unsurprisingly, the emotional temperature is also higher in the live account of the fourth movement, “Festival at Baghdad. The Sea”, though this commitment does result in the occasional moment of imprecision. Personally, I’m happy to take those tiny blemishes for the brilliantly painted musical canvas Beecham gives us here. And the climactic moment of the movement (and of the whole suite), where the “Sea” music makes its dramatic return, is simply magnificent – crowning the performance with unabashed splendour. Finally, the quiet epilogue is given with exquisite poetry, bringing down the curtain on a memorable concert.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s original intention had been to give the individual movements of his “symphonic suite” *Scheherazade* (composed in 1888) titles that suggested a work rather closer to a symphony than a suite: “Prelude”, “Ballade”, “Adagio” and “Finale”; at one point he even considered ditching the titles altogether, wanting listeners to hear the work in purely symphonic terms (in a similar way to Berlioz’s gradual abandonment of the detailed programme for the *Symphonie fantastique*). However, after taking advice from friends (including Lyadov) he decided to opt for the pictorial titles we know today, and he was surely right to do so. What he described as the “various fairy-tale wonders” he had in mind when composing the work are evoked in Beecham’s live performance with a freshness and brilliance that make for an unforgettable experience.

Beecham was always a Saint-Saëns enthusiast, though he didn't always carry critical opinion with him. Reviewing this performance of the First Cello Concerto, the critic in *The Times* noted that Beecham "is a quietly persistent advocate for Saint-Saëns, in which he is almost alone, but not even his eloquence or Mr Mischel Cherniavsky's polished, indeed one might say French-polished performance can conceal the poverty of ideas except for a few flashes of poetry." Mischel (sometimes Mischa) Cherniavsky (1893–1982) was born in Uman, Ukraine but later settled in London and became a British citizen. Beecham collectors may know him from a startlingly wayward performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto given during one of Beecham's Seattle concerts in 1943. His 1958 reading of the Saint-Saëns Concerto is more conventional, and Beecham and the RPO offer attentive support.

The "Bacchanale" from *Samson et Dalila* comes from what turned out to be the last concert Beecham conducted with the RPO in London. It was given at the Festival Hall on 24 April 1960, when the "Bacchanale" was the final item in a programme that also included Haydn's "Military" Symphony, Goldmark's Violin Concerto (with Raymond Cohen), Schubert's Fifth Symphony and "By the River" from Delius's *Florida Suite*. The audience could not have known it at the time, but their tumultuous reception of this performance proved to be a farewell to Beecham on the London concert platform (he conducted the RPO once more on 7 May, but in Portsmouth). In June 1960, Beecham suffered a cerebral thrombosis and never conducted again; he died on 8 March 1961. Though he had plenty of future plans which were abandoned (including *Die Zauberflöte* at Glyndebourne), it is somehow fitting that his last bow in London should be with this barnstorming account of one of his favourite "lollipops".

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## SHELL-SHOCKED BY BEECHAM

“Sir Thomas Beecham is far and away the greatest British conductor today. You’ll find out why when we go and see him tomorrow.”

23 April 1960: a devoted, doting father was preparing his 11¾-year-old son for a different kind of experience. My beloved, adoring parents, celebrated scientist Sam Tolansky and eminent artist Ottilie Tolansky, had already been taking me to concerts and operas for four years. I was what today might be called an adolescent anorak for classical music, and although I had no precocity at all, those events and the many records that my connoisseur parents had given me had provided me with an embryonic modicum of rudimentary musical awareness. I understood and knew little, but I nevertheless had been strongly affected by what I had seen and heard. At least I thought I had been. At the end of the following day, I realised that this time I had witnessed something unprecedented in my life – and highly unexpected.

For this kid going on twelve, sitting in the audience on the far right of the stalls about five or six rows back, my preconceived image of the nearly 81-year-old conductor about to appear was of some kind of grandiose, ancient priest. For a few seconds, I might even have been right, as a conspicuously distinguished and grand looking man walked with slow dignity onto the podium to a prolonged ovation of applause unlike any I had ever heard before. But immediately after Sir Thomas Beecham had settled into a chair from which he began conducting Haydn’s “Military” Symphony, I could clearly see from my vantage point a figure of immense physical expressiveness and dynamism conjuring up a wealth of details and nuances with his baton, his left hand and – most strikingly of all – his laser-beam eyes, all eliciting a musical result of colour, rhythm and contrasts that I instantaneously thrilled to. An ancient priest? Hardly. Rather, an ageless magician.

What of any value at all might I really be able to recall now of that event that was to be seminal in my life? I was far too young and ignorant to comprehend the results Sir Thomas was obtaining with his virtuoso hand-picked Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, or to understand the remarkable alchemy of improvisatory flamboyance and tight control that I much later saw in films of his conducting, but I can vividly remember the intense atmosphere and (for young, little me) terrifying power of the “Bacchanale” from Saint-Saëns’ wonderful opera *Samson et Dalila*. I had never heard anything remotely like it as Sir Thomas, now standing fully upright on the podium, became a generator of electric lightning, and in the last two minutes or so the Royal Festival Hall seemed to be shaking in a catastrophic earthquake. After the prolonged roars of thunderous applause at the end, I walked in a stunned daze with my parents back to our car.

Imagine my trepidation when SOMM gave me the opportunity to write this short memoir and to listen for the first time in 65 years to a recording of that very performance of the “Bacchanale”. Might I have been fantasising all this time about its exceptional power and the breathtaking rhythmic impact at its final climax? Well, if I had been scared in 1960, I was now startled in 2025. Listeners to this CD will surely realise right away, absolutely 100% precisely why I had been shell-shocked by Beecham.

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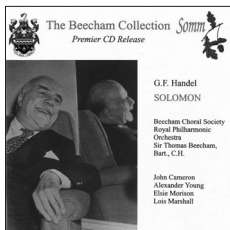
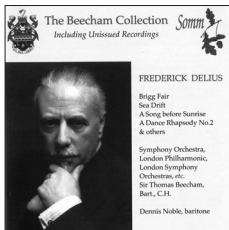
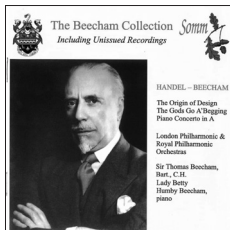
LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* (“There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – ‘historic’ – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This set is both.”), 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.

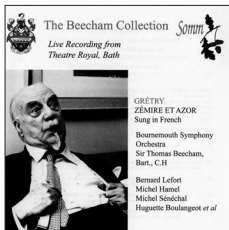
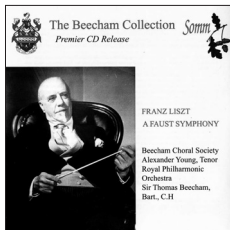
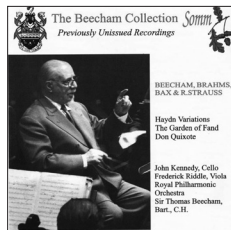
Formerly a leading performer on period oboes in the US, he was a member of Boston Baroque and the Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra of Boston. In addition, he has appeared with many of North America’s leading period instrument orchestras, including Tafelmusik, Philharmonia Baroque, Tempesta di Mare, 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.




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**Sir Thomas Beecham**

SOMM-BEECHAM 33

# THE BEECHAM COLLECTION

SOMM-BEECHAM 34



**<sup>b</sup> Mischel Cherniavsky** cello  
**ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA**  
Conductor: **Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart., C.H.**

Camille Saint-Saëns 1835–1921

**Samson et Dalila, Op.47 <sup>a</sup>**

① Act III, Scene 2: Bacchanale 6:42

**Cello Concerto No.1 in A minor, Op.33 <sup>b</sup>**

[19:33]

- ② I. Allegro non troppo 5:41  
③ II. Allegretto con moto 4:35  
④ III. Tempo primo 9:17

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov 1844–1908

**Scheherazade, Op.35 <sup>c</sup>**

[43:47]

*Leader and Violin Soloist: Steven Stryk*

- ⑤ I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship 9:18  
⑥ II. The Story of the Kalendar Prince 11:28  
⑦ III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess 10:13  
⑧ IV. Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship Breaks against  
a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman 12:47

Total duration: **70:03**

Recording (Live): Royal Festival Hall,  
<sup>c</sup> 21 March 1957  
<sup>b</sup> 19 October 1958  
<sup>a</sup> 24 April 1960

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