

Conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was born into wealth; his father, Sir Joseph Beecham, was the manufacturer of "Beecham's Pills," an all-purpose remedy very popular in Britain. More importantly, though, Sir Joseph was also a lover of music and exposed his son to it from an early age; happily, he raised no objection to Thomas' pursuit of a musical career.

After both formal and autodidactic training, Beecham made his professional debut as a symphony conductor in 1905 with members of the Queen's Hall Orchestra. When he wanted an orchestra to conduct full time, he simply used the resources of the family fortune to start one, which he led for a number of years. In 1910 Beecham began producing operas as a private impresario; he brought to the stage the British premieres of Strauss' Salome and Elektra, and operas by Delius. He founded the Beecham Opera Company, mainly made of British singers, in 1915.

However, even a fortune the size of his could not keep pace with the expenses of such activities. He was declared bankrupt in 1919 and withdrew from music to put his financial affairs into order. Having recovered by 1923, he returned to the podium, and his conducting career soon flourished. In 1928 he made his American debut with the New York Philharmonic; characteristic of his championing of Delius, he founded a festival dedicated to the music of that composer in 1929.

In 1932, Beecham, dissatisfied with the standards of the orchestral scene, founded the London Philharmonic Orchestra, staffing it with the finest players. It quickly became a top-rank ensemble and successfully toured the Continent. He became artistic director at Covent Garden in 1932, and ruled there in his customary autocratic manner. When the war began, Beecham toured the United States and Australia. He was appointed music director and conductor of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (1941-1943) and was a frequent guest conductor at the Metropolitan Opera Company until he returned to England in 1944.

Upon his arrival in England, Beecham discovered that the orchestras there weren't overly enthusiastic at the prospect of working permanently in proximity to his withering tongue and dictatorial manner. Even the London Philharmonic Orchestra, with a new charter that permitted it to make some of its own decisions, showed little interest in having him at the helm full-time. So, typically, Beecham founded a new orchestra in 1946 -- the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra -- and maintained his relationship with this group for the remainder of his career. Beecham had already made a notable number of recordings before World War II. With the coming of the LP record after the war, and into the beginning of the stereo era, he recorded frequently. His recordings of Mozart, Haydn, Handel (he did not like Bach), Delius, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Sibelius are particularly esteemed; his recordings of Carmen and Madama Butterfly remain classics.



BEECHAM

Peer Gynt - Incidental Music

Borodin - Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor

Sir Thomas Beecham / Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



The incidental music Edvard Grieg composed for Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (1867) stands, along with his *Holberg Suite* and *Piano Concerto*, among his most universally popular orchestral works. By common consent, the music itself achieved far more for Ibsen's vast and bewildering dramatic poem than any mere stage performance alone could have done, and therein lies a problem. For as Ibsen's English biographer Michael Meyer writes, Grieg's music "turns the play into a jolly Hans Andersen fairy tale," one thing its author would certainly never have wished for. And the critic and playwright George Bernard Shaw, a fervent advocate of Ibsen's works, similarly concluded that in his music Grieg "could only catch a few superficial points in the play instead of getting to the very heart and brain of it." That may well be the case, but Grieg's *Peer Gynt* incidental music has nevertheless become a universal favorite, and it is not difficult to understand why.

Ibsen decided to adapt his verse drama for performance at the Christiania (Oslo) Theatre in 1874, recognizing that his sprawling five-act play would benefit greatly from the addition of a musical score. Grieg's music was first heard there in February 1876, but the initial production run was radically curtailed after fire destroyed the sets and costumes. The score, however, was enthusiastically received by the critics, and Grieg subsequently saw an opportunity to establish a separate identity for the music itself and drew from the more than two dozen numbers of the complete work two concert suites, Opp. 46 and 54. Conductors sometimes assemble ad hoc suites of their own as well.

The most popular numbers are "In the Hall of the Mountain King" (a textbook example of the dramatic potency of cumulative crescendo and accelerando, illustrating Grieg's fondness for Germanic orchestral effects), in which *Peer Gynt* bargains for his life after the assembled Trolls call for his blood, and the highly evocative "Morning Mood" with its lovely flute solo and expansive orchestral language -- the music depicts, incidentally, not a fresh Nordic sunrise, but rather a Saharan dawn in Act IV of Ibsen's drama! Other memorable moments include the fragile lyric utterances of "Solweig's

Song," the beguiling "Anitra's Dance," the poignant "Death of Åse," "Peer Gynt's Homecoming: Stormy Evening at Sea," and his eventual "Shipwreck." As Anthony Burton writes, "the curtain falls as *Peer's* long and eventful journey finally comes to its end."

The Polovtsian Dances, or Polovetsian Dances (Russian: Половецкие пляски, Polovetskie plyaski from the Russian "Polovtsy"—the name given to the Kipchaks and Cumans by the Rus' people) form an exotic scene at the end of Act II of Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*.

The work remained unfinished when the composer died in 1887, although he had worked on it for more than a decade. A performing version was prepared by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov, appearing in 1890. Several other versions, or "completions," of the opera have been made. The dances are performed with chorus and last between 11 and 14 minutes. They occur in Act I or Act II, depending on which version of the opera is being used. Their music is popular and sometimes given in concert as an orchestral showpiece. At such performances the choral parts are often omitted. The opera also has a "Polovtsian March," which opens Act III, and an overture at the start. When the dances are given in concert, a suite may be formed: Overture, Polovtsian Dances and March from "Prince Igor."

As part of his first "Saison Russe" at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, Sergei Diaghilev presented *Polovtsian Scenes and Dances*, consisting of Act II of *Prince Igor*, with full orchestra and singers. The premiere took place on 18 May 1909. The choreography was by Michel Fokine and the sets and costumes were designed by Nicholas Roerich. In later seasons, without singers, the work was given as *The Polovtsian Dances*. For the 1923 season, it was partly re-choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska.

Peer Gynt - Incidental Music

Borodin - Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor

Sir Thomas Beecham / Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

- 1 Wedding March (Orch. Halvorsen) 3:47
 - 2 Ingrid's Lament 4:27
 - 3 In The Hall Of The Mountain King 2:16
 - 4 Morning 4:09
 - 5 Ase's Death 6:00
 - 6 Arabian Dance 4:45
 - 7 Solveig's Song 5:20
 - 8 Anitra's Dance 4:03
 - 9 Return Of Peer Gynt - Storm Scene 3:04
 - 11 Borodin Prince Igor Polovtsian Dances 15:56
- Total Time: 53:47

Transferred from a 2-track tape 15ips tape

Recorded by EMI Records Grieg 1957

Borodin recorded 1956



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