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Boris BLACHER (1903-1975)

1 Music for Cleveland, Op.53

8:43

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)

Piano Concerto No.27 in B flat major, K.595†

- | | |
|------------------------|-------|
| 2 I. Allegro | 12:46 |
| 3 II. Larghetto | 7:46 |
| 4 III. Allegro | 7:35 |

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.73

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 5 I. Allegro non troppo | 14:29 |
| 6 II. Adagio non troppo | 8:27 |
| 7 III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino) | 5:09 |
| 8 IV. Allegro con spirito | 8:41 |

Igor STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

9 Fireworks, Fantasy for Orchestra

3:34

ROBERT CASADESUS piano†

COLOGNE RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

GEORGE SZELL

Broadcast Recording, 1958



Guild
HISTORICAL

GEORGE SZELL

BLACHER
Music for Cleveland
MOZART
Piano Concerto No.27
BRAHMS
Symphony No.2
STRAVINSKY
Fireworks

ROBERT CASADESUS

Cologne Radio
Symphony Orchestra

Recorded 1958



ROBERT CASADESUS

A GUILD HISTORICAL RELEASE

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elsewhere), but his favoured soloist in these works was undoubtedly the great French pianist Robert Casadesus, with whom he recorded no fewer than 12 of them – some, more than once with Casadesus. Although Szell recorded Mozart Concertos with other pianists, it was entirely natural that Casadesus should be Szell's soloist in Cologne at this time in the composer's last piano concerto. The performance is of notable artistry and refinement, and was followed by Brahms's Second Symphony, of which Szell was to go on to make a virtually definite set of the four Brahms symphonies later in Cleveland – a set notable for Szell, as a youth, had studied with Eusebius Mandyczewski, who had in turn been a close friend of Brahms.

Following the Brahms Symphony, and virtually as an encore, Szell and the Cologne Radio Orchestra went on to give a brilliant performance of Stravinsky's *Fireworks*, Op 4 – composed exactly 50 years before, in 1908, and premiered under the baton of Alexander Siloti, Rachmaninoff's cousin. In the audience for that St Petersburg concert, and hearing Stravinsky's music for the first time, was Serge Diaghilev. And so this fine concert in Cologne opened and ended with music by two composers with which George Szell's name would not generally be associated, alongside masterpieces by two greater composers with whom his name will forever be linked – so long as recordings by eminent conductors of the past are studied.

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The reputation of the great Hungarian-born conductor George Szell (1897-1970) centres upon his 24 years (1946-70) as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra in the United States, where his name – aided by a long series of outstanding gramophone recordings – became almost legendary. His reputation among orchestral musicians was that of a harsh task-master, autocratic to a degree, although it is probably true to say that stories about him were somewhat exaggerated in the telling; When he came to London in 1961 to record with the London Symphony Orchestra, Sam Lewis, then a member of the LSO's viola section recalled: 'It was at the Watford Town Hall that I first had the opportunity of playing under his direction for a Decca recording session. We recorded the Hamilton Harty version of Handel's *Water Music* edited by Szell himself. News travels fast and we had been forewarned that we were about to face a 'cruel taskmaster' who hires and fires without pity, loses his temper for no apparent reason and simply walks out if he doesn't get his way. Szell apparently preferred not to work with self-governing orchestras but reluctantly conceded that 'British orchestras are the finest sight readers in the world.' Back in the 1950s and 60s many record companies came to London to record because London had four fine symphony orchestras and numerous outstanding free-lance musicians. They worked efficiently and were also cheaper. At the stroke of 2.30pm Dr. Szell entered together with the LSO General Manager Ernest Fleischman, the orchestra stood, Szell said 'Good afternoon gentlemen', stepped onto the podium with his grey cardigan wrapped around his waist like a butcher's apron and calmly said 'Please be informed this is not the first time I have conducted the London Symphony Orchestra. Back in 1938 when I was musical director of the Scottish National Orchestra, I conducted the LSO and have been given to understand that the orchestra has very much improved since then. Let's get to know each other and make some music together'. Within seconds the orchestra sounded completely different. It was impossible not to give anything but your very best to this man. Why? Because you could instantly feel that he gave everything he had to the music and to you. He conducted every bar of music. He didn't need a score because the score was in his head. His upbeat was crystal clear, the rhythm of his baton, the directions from his left hand, he looked at you. You simply had to give him everything he wanted and you gave it to him willingly. Within seconds, the LSO played like..... The Cleveland Orchestra.'

Extant recordings of George Szell conducting other than the Cleveland Orchestra are very few, so the appearance of this broadcast concert from 1958 with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra is a rarity indeed. The year before, in May 1957, Szell decided that the time had arrived for him to introduce the Cleveland Orchestra's sound to the audiences of Europe and for the music world to learn that the United States had five fine orchestras – New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and now Cleveland. For this tour, the stakes were very high: America had become his artistic home but his roots remained in Europe. The first port of call was Antwerp on May 7th, followed by Brussels on the 8th and the 9th in Bremen, and London's Royal Festival Hall on the 10th. The orchestra arrived at midday, had lunch and a couple of hours siesta. Szell held a short balance rehearsal at 6.00pm and at 8.00pm London's concertgoers witnessed Strauss's *Don Juan*, Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony and Brahms First Symphony. Such was the standing ovation after the Brahms that Szell gave the audience an unforgettable rendition of the Berlioz *Hungarian March* as an encore. The following words the next morning were written by one of London's most highly regarded critics:- "No finer orchestral playing has yet been heard in the Royal Festival Hall, and I doubt whether anything superior is to be heard anywhere else. Passages which almost always sound harsh or scrawny came through with a comely bloom even in the far from flattering acoustics of the Festival Hall".

The six week tour continued across Europe with twenty-nine concerts plus thirteen rehearsals in twenty-two cities in eleven countries. The highlight of the tour for Szell was his return to Vienna, the city where he spent his childhood and early youth. *Die Presse* wrote – 'He brought an American orchestra that he had trained in triumph to the city considered for two centuries the centre of Western music. Szell grew up and formed his musical tastes in Vienna. He was a source of pride for the city, as well. What almost personally binds us with the Cleveland musicians is the fact that George Szell has been their conductor and artistic leader for a full ten years, can rightly be counted as one of ours. *Die Presse* continues – 'When one thinks of the character of his performances, on the clear and precise manner of its musical diction, on the rhythmic exactness, on the acuteness of the dynamics and the flexible technique of the exchanges of shadings, of the transitions and preparations, so may the qualities be which rest completely with the personality of the conductor,

who knows what he wants from the music which he performs. He has a clear picture before him in which nothing is cloudy, nothing is allowed to remain approximate.'

After this tour, every orchestra in Europe wanted Szell, but his first allegiance was to Cleveland. His recordings with the Orchestra were by now world-famous, including many concerto discs with world-class soloists, amongst whom the pianists Robert Casadesu and Rudolf Serkin (Szell had known Serkin from their teenaged years as fellow-students) were arguably the most eminent. None the less, following the 1957 European tour, Szell accepted invitations from European orchestras, including those in the cities of London, Amsterdam, Berlin and – in this instance – Cologne.

This remarkable concert adds another layer to our perception of Szell's reputation, for he was famous for his interpretations of the great symphonic masterpieces – Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvořák, Mahler and Richard Strauss: his recordings of their music have entered gramophone history, but he made relatively few recordings of music by contemporary composers: even so, those commercially-issued recordings he did make were of exceptional quality – music by Bartók, Stravinsky, Walton, Hindemith, Prokofiev, Kodály, Barber and William Schuman, in particular.

The quality of the Cleveland Orchestra under Szell was such that composers would be excited to learn of a possible performance of one of their works – more so if the music had been commissioned for the Orchestra. One of those commissioned works was *Music for Cleveland* Op.53 by the German composer Boris Blacher. The work dates from 1957, and was one of several scores commissioned to mark the 40th anniversary season (1957-58) of the Cleveland Orchestra. Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra had given the world premiere of the work on November 21st 1957, and so it was a suitable choice for him to include it in his programme with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra (WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln) which was in turn celebrating its tenth anniversary at the time of Szell's concert with them.

Blacher's *Music for Cleveland* is scored for triple woodwind, standard brass (but with four trumpets), timpani, percussion, harp and strings, and forms a brilliant, if somewhat unconventional, opening to the programme – guaranteed to put the orchestra on its mettle.

Szell made many recordings in Cleveland of Mozart piano concertos (and occasionally