

Beecham and the Clarinet Player



Sir Thomas Beecham, the great English conductor, the so-called "amateur" conductor, was one of the great musical intellects of the 20th-century, but he never let it go to his head. He had a very informal style of dealing with professional situations, and sometimes broke the rules. For instance, he would occasionally walk into a rehearsal at 10:00 in the morning, to go over a standard program of Beethoven, or Mozart, etc., and after a few minutes would say something like, "I say, you chaps seem to have played this music before! What say we knock off for the day. I'll see you tonight at the concert."

Well, one day he came in to rehearse the London Symphony on a program including the Brahms First Symphony. After a few minutes of pleasant playing, Beecham said, "I say, you chaps seem to have played this music before! What say we knock off for the day. I'll see you tonight at the concert."

As the group was breaking up, a young clarinet player came rushing forward, hysterically exclaiming, "Mr. Beecham, Mr. Beecham! I've never played the Brahms First Symphony!"

Beecham looked with astonishment at the young musician, and said in his great, expansive, old English gentleman accent, "Whaaaat? Never played the Brahms First Symphony? Why, it's a beautiful piece my boy, you'll love it!"

I talk a lot to my composition students about these lines in Yeats' poem, *Adam's Curse*:

"We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry,
I said, 'A line will take as hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

" Better go down upon your marrow bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones.
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world."

This poem addresses the issue of spontaneity within a disciplined context. Many times, in life, we really feel the need to be in control of something; and the serious study of music gives many people that pleasant feeling of being in control, of having it all together, of having all their t's crossed. The Beecham story makes this point: no matter how much we want to be in control, there is a time for letting go; there is a time to trust in our previous training, and just let ourselves discover something—spontaneously, uncritically, regardless of any arbitrary standard—for the first time.