

**T**HERE is an old, and not very good, German joke about an ecstatic mother who is being battered over the head with a chair by her truculent male offspring. "Ach," says she, "Oswald is so talented! We must him a symphony conductor make!" The joke embellishes a legend that may be somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is a fact that, with the exception of top sergeants, fascist fuehrers, and "bring 'em back alive" animal trainers, symphony conductors are probably the most withering and tyrannical group of men to be found in civilised society to-day. The fact even has the conductors themselves worried. Arturo Toscanini several years ago got tired of looking at his own leonine scowl and directed that his billboard pictures should henceforth show him smiling benignly. Serge Koussevitzky has been at some pains to keep his threatening grimaces out of the public prints.

In private life nowadays most of them try to emphasise, rather embarrassedly, that they are really good fellows who play golf, slap their friends on the back and joke just like other people. But most of them know, deep down, that it is hard to escape certain facts about their profession. Symphony concerts are probably the most totalitarian spectacles still tolerated in democratic society. They are very often performed in an atmosphere of snarling hostility. Relations between maestros and the men who work for them are quite generally on the same level of cordiality as those between lion-tamers and lions. Great conductors, as a rule, achieve their finest triumphs not by sweet reasonableness but by goading, wheedling, and browbeating their orchestras.

### He is an Impressive Spectacle

The most unorthodox approach is probably that of Sir Thomas Beecham. A man of lordly, Victorian bearing, whose imperial goatee and aristocratic aloofness would stamp him as a personality in any walk of life, Beecham manages to dominate an orchestra by sheer mental agility. He is, to begin with, an impressive spectacle. He is so obviously accustomed to command that minor attempts at sabotage seem a trifle silly. Beecham would greet such attempts with the lofty incredulity of an admiral politely overlooking the fact that a fumbling messboy had spilled the soup. He is probably the only important conductor before the public with a sufficient command of 18th century English to frighten an orchestra with verbal wit. The repertoire of elementary epithets—"shoemakers," "half-wits," "idiots," "pigs," etc.—used by many conductors to convey their opinions of the men who work under them, have no part in the carefully-chosen and fluent Beecham vocabulary. So secure is Beecham in his habit of authority that, like all men of unquestioned eminence, he can afford to unbend without fear of losing his dignity. He can joke, clown, wander around the orchestra, ask his musicians for advice, impersonate a windmill, chew his baton, admit frankly that he is not familiar with the score—and still maintain an atmosphere of dignity. "Beecham," George Bernard Shaw is supposed to have remarked on one occasion, "is the only adult conductor I have ever met." He has, at any rate, the faculty of treating

# MUSIC AND PILLS



*"SIR THOMAS BEECHAM, the lordly heir to laxative millions, is Britain's best orchestra conductor and the only successful democrat in the world's most dictatorial profession."*

(Winthrop Sargent in "Life")

his men as fellow adults. To the average symphony orchestra this experience is so novel at first as to be unnerving.

### Gymnastic Performances

The informality of the Beecham approach is perhaps best exemplified in the curious vocabulary of gesticulation he uses to convey his ideas to the orchestra during performances. Many orchestra musicians maintain that he doesn't really conduct at all. The carefully-polished gestures of Koussevitzky, the sensitive-baton technique of Toscanini are refinements that Beecham manages to get along without. He has, properly speaking, no technique of the baton whatever. His rounded, dignified figure bounces and cavorts like that of an excited racing fan whose horse is winning by a nose. He will kick up his heels, lunge like a fencer, stand on one foot, crouch as if expected to bring his oboeist down with a flying tackle, shadow-box, throw his arms into the air like a college cheer-leader.

The truly astonishing thing about these gymnastic performances is that the music Sir Thomas is conducting

issues from the orchestra with precision, polish, and exquisite grace. No other famous contemporary conductor—not even Toscanini—can match the delicate yet virile flavour these violent gestures impart to a Mozart or a Haydn symphony, and his taste seems infallible in everything from Brahms and Richard Strauss to Russian ballet music and French opera.

### A Fortune from Pills

Beecham could probably stand on his head, thumb his nose at the audience, and still remain every inch an English baronet. This aplomb is traceable in part to the fact that Beecham is absolutely independent of the economic pressure that can be brought to bear on average mortals. He is one of England's richest men. The £40,000,000 fortune amassed by his forbears through the invention and sale of England's most popular laxative, Beecham's Pills, has enabled Sir Thomas to buy symphony orchestras and opera houses as another multi-millionaire might buy yachts or racing stables. He is probably the only maestro in the world who conducts

purely for pleasure. This pleasure is not marred by the slightest worry over what critics, audiences, boards of directors, or fellow-artists think of him. Another contributing factor is unquestionably Beecham's genial and eminently balanced mind, which not only thinks faster than those of most of his colleagues, but delights in defying the tradition of pompous sham that often surrounds the profession of conducting. But perhaps the most important factor is Beecham's enormous artistic authority. Beneath all this tomfoolery Beecham really is a learned and artistically unimpeachable musical scholar.

Sir Thomas's knowledge rests on almost half-a-century's experience during which he has organised, financed, conducted and propagandised more orchestras, opera houses, and other musical institutions than most of his competitors can shake a baton at. The opportunity for this vast experience was due to the family pill business which in turn owed its success to two remarkable men.

The first of these was Beecham's grandfather Thomas, a kindly, imaginative Lancashire chemist and horse doctor who sold home-made pills under an umbrella in the streets of the little town of Wigan in the 1840's. The second was Beecham's father, Sir Joseph, whose genius for advertising increased the international consumption of Beecham's Pills to a million a day. Sir Joseph's masterpiece was a hymn book, circulated gratis, which contained the famous quatrain:

*Hark the herald angels sing,  
Beecham's Pills are just the thing.  
Peace on earth and mercy mild,  
Two for man and one for child.*

Eventually, Sir Joseph became a man of great wealth and one of England's most munificent patrons of music and the theatre.

### How He Began

When Sir Thomas was a little boy, the Beecham home near Liverpool was a rendezvous for famous musicians from all over Europe. Brought up in a household of distinguished musical guests, he studied the piano and took lessons in musical composition. He also learned, at first-hand and practically from the cradle, the traditions and psychology of his fellow-musicians. When, at the age of 20, Sir Thomas organised his first symphony orchestra, waggish associates dubbed it the "Pillharmonic." Sir Thomas was undismayed. A short time later he took his place in the audition line of a small touring British opera company. He was trying to get a job as an accompanist. He was surrounded by singers awaiting their turn in the impresario's anteroom. One singer had forgotten her music. Sir Thomas offered his services. "But," said the impresario, "do you understand? You will have to play the accompaniment entirely from memory." "Certainly," replied Sir Thomas. He not only accompanied the singer's aria, he went on accompanying successive singers in arias from dozens of operas—all flawlessly, all from memory. By the time he had finished, the impresario had hired him not as an accompanist but as conductor of his company.

### Genius Plus Funds

Aided by the happy combination of genius and practically unlimited funds, Sir Thomas went on to become the

(continued on next page)