

Top 10 Walton recordings

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Ten great albums of William Walton's music from Edward Gardner, Richard Hickox, Andrew Litton, André Previn and many more



From his earliest twenties an enfant terrible, for the last 30 and more years of his life an elder statesman, Sir William Walton enjoyed an extraordinary career. Here are ten outstanding recordings of some of his finest works, including the Gramophone Award-winning Troilus and Cressida conducted by Richard Hickox, Steven Isserlis's fine recent account of the Cello Concerto and André Previn's sensational account of the First Symphony with the LSO.

Walton The Centenary Edition

Robert Cohen *vc* **Tasmin Little** *vn* **Paul Neubauer** *va* **Bryn Terfel** *bar* **Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra** / **Andrew Litton**

- Concerto for Cello and Orchestra
- Symphony No. 1
- Scapino
- Concerto for Violin and Orchestra
- Symphony No. 2
- Façade, Suite No. 1
- Façade, Suite No. 2
- Concerto for Viola and Orchestra
- Variations on a Theme by Hindemith
- Crown Imperial
- Belshazzar's Feast
- Coronation Te Deum
- Henry V
- Orb and Sceptre

Decca's four-disc Walton Edition offers consistently fine versions of all of the composer's most important orchestral works, some of them unsurpassed, in full, brilliant sound. Andrew Litton, the conductor of all but two minor items is central to the success of the whole. Like his compatriot, André Previn, he is idiomatic, with a natural feeling for the

jazzy syncopations at the heart of so much of Walton's music.

Substantially, this brings together the three Litton discs previously issued but with important additions. The third disc was issued separately last year and contains outstanding versions, never previously released, of the Viola Concerto and Hindemith Variations plus the two Façade Suites. Where most latterday interpreters of the Viola Concerto have taken a very expansive view of the lyrical first movement, Paul Neubauer comes nearer than anyone to the original interpreters on disc, Frederick Riddle and William Primrose, both with Walton conducting.

With Neubauer – his tone firm and precise, clean rather than fruity – the result is more persuasive than other modern versions with no suspicion of expressive self-indulgence. With the brisker passages in this movement also taken faster than is now usual, the impact is tauter and stronger without losing romantic warmth. The central Scherzo is excitingly fast and the finale kept moving without losing a spring in the jaunty rhythm of the main theme. He relaxes seductively for the hauntingly beautiful epilogue, using the widest dynamic range. Litton encourages wide contrasts in the orchestra, the big tuttis bringing an element of wildness in the brassy syncopations, the ensemble kept crisp and incisive. The Hindemith Variations also brings a taut and purposeful performance with contrasts in both dynamic and speed heightened to extremes. This goes with an exceptional transparency in the orchestral textures, well-caught in the recording which highlights the refinement of Walton's orchestration. Façade is predictably fun, though there is some danger of the warm acoustic softening some of the sharpness of these witty parodies. Two of the other discs remain the same as with their original release, with Tasmin Little's heartfelt reading of the Violin Concerto very well coupled with Litton's outstanding account of the Second Symphony, the finest digital version yet, as well as Scapino, while Robert Cohen's thoughtful reading of the Cello Concerto comes in coupling with the First Symphony, richly recorded.

Litton's powerful account of Belshazzar's Feast with Bryn Terfel brings fresh, cleanly focused choral sound set in an atmospheric acoustic which clearly lets you appreciate the terracing between the different groupings of voices. That aptly comes with the coronation music – and the Henry V Suite, with David Hill, chorus-master in Belshazzar, ably standing in for Litton in the Coronation Te Deum and Orb and Sceptre.

Sony's two-disc Essential Classics collection brings together major offerings from three previous Walton CDs, all of them American. Outstanding are the vintage Szell performances with the Cleveland Orchestra, in sheer brilliance never likely to be outshone. The composer himself was bowled over by Szell's 1961 Second Symphony, a work till then rather discounted, which drew an interpretation not just brilliant but passionate. In Szell's high-powered reading the Hindemith Variations, too, hang together superbly, and the Partita, a Cleveland commission, is scintillating from first to last.

André Kostelanetz turns the Capriccio Burlesco into a sparkling comedy overture, a work he was the first to conduct, and the Johannesburg Festival Overture is made to sparkle too, arguably the finest of the Walton overtures. Both the Violin Concerto and Belshazzar's Feast are given expressive performances by Ormandy conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. In the Concerto Zino Francescatti is powerful and passionate with his rapid, slightly nervy vibrato, while in Belshazzar choir and soloist are as committed as any British performers, even if their pronunciation of 'Isaiah' is pure American, the second syllable rhyming with 'day'.

None of these CBS/Sony recordings can match Decca's digitals in warmth or refinement, all in typically up-front sound if with plenty of atmosphere, some dating back to 1959. But what other British composer has been so generously and so understandingly interpreted on disc in American recordings?

RCA's two-disc collection also has its American offering: the première recording of the Cello Concerto with Piatigorsky – who commissioned the work – and the Boston Symphony

under Charles Munch. Here is another high-powered reading, given an upfront recording, commendably full and open for 1959. Similarly Heifetz, who commissioned the Violin Concerto, remains supreme as an interpreter of that work, urgent beyond any rival as well as passionate. Here he plays with the composer conducting the Philharmonia. The 1950 mono recording has been nicely opened up, putting more air around the sound, making the absence of stereo a minimal drawback. The other two concertante works come in digital versions: Kathryn Stott, originally for Conifer, adventurously going back to the original more elaborate version of the Sinfonia concertante, and Yuri Bashmet bringing his yearningly Slavonic temperament and masterly virtuosity to the Viola Concerto. Bashmet's partners are the ideal combination of Previn and the LSO, and it is Previn's vintage version of the First Symphony with the LSO of an earlier generation that sets the seal on the whole package. As I said in my survey of the symphonies in April's Gramophone Collection, Previn has never been matched, let alone surpassed. What is also remarkable is the clarity, definition and sense of presence of the 1966 recording, with the stereo spectrum more sharply focused than in the digital recordings. Having a two-disc package was no doubt more convenient, but what a pity that RCA/BMG did not take the opportunity to add a third disc from their catalogue, Leonard Slatkin's excellent coupling of Belshazzar's Feast, the Partita and the Henry V Suite.

By Edward Greenfield