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- CONTENTS -

	Page
1. Editorial	4
2. Sibelius the complete symphonies and other orchestral works <i>by Andrew Knowles</i>	6
3. Loris Tjeknavorian and Sibelius 4 & 5 <i>by Robert Matthew Walker</i>	11
4. Sibelius 1915 Version of Fifth Symphony <i>by Peter Frankland</i>	14
5. Sibelius – Fourth Symphony Critical Edition Review <i>by Edward Clark</i>	20
6. Some thoughts on the astonishing violinist Aaron Rosand <i>by Efi Christodoulou</i>	23
7. Music you might like (11) n – p <i>by Simon Coombs</i>	25
8. Tapiola A postscript <i>by Edward Clark</i>	30
9. Two Final Symphonies <i>by Edward Clark</i>	31
10. From Complex to Glory <i>by Edward Clark</i>	34
11. Obituary - Ida Haendel <i>by Edward Clark</i>	37
12. Correspondence	40
13. Concert reviews	47
14. CD Reviews	52

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Loris Tjeknavorian and Sibelius 4 & 5

By Robert Matthew Walker

In early 1975, I was appointed head of the UK classical department of RCA records, having been Director of Marketing for CBS UK, which earlier position embraced all aspects of the company's catalogue: pop, rock, folk music, classical, special products, promotion (radio, tv, press, public appearances, public relations), and all advertising.

My CBS job arose after I had been head of the company's UK classical department, from which I was catapulted into the Marketing Director's position.

In my new CBS post, I learned a very great deal more about how to sell records, but my heart truly lay in classical music, and when RCA offered me the job, I took it like a shot.

Two weeks after joining RCA, the company signed James Galway. I was determined to apply pop marketing techniques (which I had learned at CBS) to the launch and promotion of this magnificent artist. I felt his wholly engaging personality – especially at the time of the troubles in Northern Ireland – could break through to a very wide audience, but it had to be planned in great detail and with Jimmy's full co-operation.

It worked and suddenly RCA was the 'go-to' label for many aspiring artists. Of course, I was also responsible for the long-established RCA artists – especially Arthur Rubinstein, with whom I soon established (despite the 50-year difference in our ages) a genuine but respectful friendship, as well as Leopold Stokowski, Sherrill Milnes, Leontyne Price, Van Cliburn and Eugene Ormandy, among others. Amongst RCA's new signings in 1975 were James Levine and Emanuel Ax, both of whom – I'm pleased to say – took my advice with regard to promotion and repertoire choices.

In my new position, I soon identified areas of the repertoire in which RCA's catalogue was deficient: I was determined also to expand the range of British music and artists on the label, and soon did exclusive deals with the Scottish National Orchestra and (later Sir) Alexander Gibson, and the Bournemouth Sinfonietta. I also made Richard Hickox's first recordings for RCA.

But I still did not have a conductor whose recording career I could plan properly, until one day I received a letter from a friend of the Iranian-born Christian conductor and composer Loris Tjeknavorian, the Director of Music for the Shah of Iran, who was prepared to finance some recordings conducted by Loris if I considered him good enough.

Loris was no stranger to the recording studio, having made a number of discs for Unicorn and other labels, but when I saw him conduct the LSO in Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* I knew he was very probably the kind of conductor I was looking for.

In the USA, RCA had just issued a new recording of that work with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra and I had also reissued in a boxed set Monteux's Boston Symphony recordings of Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies: the last thing we wanted was another *Pathétique*! But when Loris pointed out that all recording costs would be met by the Iran Artistic Foundation, I agreed – though I told him he may have to wait a while for it to be issued.

The result was a profoundly impressive performance. I knew then that I had found my conductor and that his debut on RCA had to be carefully managed. I planned four repertoire areas for Loris: Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, Stravinsky and Britten.

If one worked, we would follow that repertoire and quietly drop the others. The first releases for Loris were of the *Pathétique* and Sibelius Symphonies 4 & 5 with the RPO. I chose the two Sibelius symphonies as twenty years earlier I had bought the mono CBS Ormandy/

Philadelphia coupling of the two symphonies which were issued in Europe on Philips.

That was a famous record. The two symphonies had never been coupled again, so I knew pairing Sibelius 4 & 5 would get the critics' attention. At that time, Loris was helped in his musicological research by Ateş Orga, who I commissioned to write his albums' liner notes.

The recordings were produced by the legendary Charles ('Chuck') Gerhardt and George Korngold (the composer's son) with both of whom I had soon become close: the results exceeded my expectations – the Tchaikovsky and Sibelius albums received exceptional reviews and I determined to make cycles of the Sibelius and Tchaikovsky Symphonies with Loris - neither of which RCA had ever had.

At CBS I had put forward a plan to record the three Borodin symphonies, but it was not followed up. At RCA, I felt Loris would be just the man for this project, after his Tchaikovsky and Sibelius successes, and when Chuck Gerhardt came up with other orchestral music by Borodin the die was cast.

This proved to be a tremendous success: Loris's 3-LP box of Borodin's complete orchestral music became the fastest-selling boxed set RCA had ever issued – with over 6,000 sets sold within five weeks – and I knew I had picked a winner.

But my successes in the UK had not gone unnoticed in RCA's headquarters in New York. Plans were afoot – as I learned – to reduce my overall responsibilities and – as one said – 'to put me in my place'.

Rather than having earned a demotion, for that is what it was, I felt my efforts with the entire range of the company's artists should be supported – after all, I had demonstrated that I knew how to plan and sell records.

So, I left the company. Within months, the Iranian Revolution had taken place – the Shah and his wife (whom I had met in London – the most beautiful woman I ever saw) were cruelly deposed and Christians (of whom Loris was one) expelled. Loris was stateless, and it was only through President Carter’s intervention that he was able to live in the United States.

After I left RCA, Loris made one or two further recordings of Sibelius symphonies for the company, but the cycle was never completed. It was only some years later, that that catalogue omission was repaired with a fine cycle by Sir Colin Davis and the Boston Symphony: yet Loris’s recordings of Sibelius 4 & 5 will always hold a special place for me.