

ERIK TUXEN

THE DANISH STATE RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

JOHANNES BRAHMS

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES • FIRST RELEASE

No. 1 (Copenhagen 1951) • No. 2 (London 1951)
No. 3 (Flensburg 1951) • No. 4 (Copenhagen 1949)

Three conductors stand out in Danish musical life during the years after the Second World War: Launy Grøndahl (1886–1960), Thomas Jensen (1898–1963) and Erik Tuxen (1902–1957). All three were closely associated with the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra, then one of Europe's leading orchestras, and all three played an important part in bringing Carl Nielsen's music to an international audience through concerts, foreign tours and pioneering gramophone recordings.

In recent years Danacord has issued extensive retrospective editions devoted to Launy Grøndahl and Thomas Jensen. With the present release, comprising previously unpublished Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra performances of Brahms's four symphonies from 1949 and 1951, Danacord turns its attention to Erik Tuxen.

Of the three conductors, Tuxen was the only one to establish an international career as a conductor. Whereas Grøndahl's commercial recordings were confined almost exclusively to Danish music, and Thomas Jensen's recordings of non-Nordic repertoire were made for the Danish label Tono primarily for the Danish market, Tuxen recorded Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's *Marche slave* and Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 4* for Decca, indicating that the record company regarded him not merely as an ambassador for Danish music, but as a conductor of broad artistic authority. He also appeared as guest conductor with the Philadelphia Orchestra and other orchestras across the Americas, and guest conducted in several European countries. His international career thus extended both to the concert platform and to the recording studio.

Erik Oluf Tuxen was born in Mannheim on 4 July 1902 to Danish parents. His musical gifts became apparent at an early age, and his German violin teacher advised that he should leave school in order to devote himself entirely to music. His father, however, regarded such a course as too uncertain. After the family returned to Denmark, Tuxen graduated from Odense Cathedral School in 1920 and three years later from the School of Architecture of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. By then, however, he had already resolved upon a musical career.

Having begun his musical studies in Denmark, Tuxen continued them in Germany and Austria, studying composition in Mannheim with Ernst Toch and piano in Vienna with the Danish pianist Victor Schiøler, whom he later accompanied on several occasions as conductor. After further studies in Berlin he joined the opera in Lübeck in 1927 as répétiteur and assistant

Kapellmeister, where he also arranged and composed incidental music.

Returning to Denmark in 1929, Tuxen was first engaged by the open-air theatre in Dyrehaven, north of Copenhagen, before making his breakthrough later the same year at Copenhagen's Det Ny Teater in Kurt Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper*. In 1930 he joined the Royal Danish Theatre, where he conducted, among other works, Ernst Krenek's *Johnny spielt auf*.

These two operas, both profoundly influenced by jazz, point towards an important aspect of Tuxen's musical personality. Between 1933 and 1936 he directed a jazz orchestra consisting of many of Denmark's leading jazz musicians, achieving remarkable popular success and becoming one of the country's best-known musical personalities.

Yet his enthusiasm for jazz never diminished his commitment to the classical repertoire. The turning point came in 1936, when Danish State Radio announced a competition for a conductorship with the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra. Tuxen entered and secured the appointment, thereby exchanging his own jazz orchestra for an ensemble that had, in little more than a decade, developed into one of Europe's outstanding symphony orchestras, its artistic standards having been shaped above all by the recurring guest conductors Nicolai Malko and Fritz Busch. Busch himself described it in a 1948 interview as "the finest orchestra I have ever conducted – and I have stood before no fewer than 120 orchestras, so I know what I am talking about."

Tuxen was to become one of the conductors most closely associated with the orchestra, and apart from two years during the German occupation, when he had to flee to Sweden – his wife was of Jewish descent, and he himself was regarded by the Germans as anti-German – he stayed with them until his untimely death 21 years later.

Among Tuxen's most important achievements was the contribution he made, together with his colleagues Launy Grøndahl and Thomas Jensen, to the cause of Carl Nielsen. Through their work with the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra, the three conductors played a decisive part in bringing Nielsen's music to an international audience in the post-war years. A particularly important moment came in 1950, when the orchestra played Nielsen's Fifth Symphony under Tuxen's direction at the Edinburgh Festival in a performance widely regarded as a turning point in the work's international reception. The symphony remained central to his repertoire thereafter. During the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra's American tour in

1952 he conducted it fifteen times, while Thomas Jensen conducted twenty performances of the Fourth. Tuxen also conducted Nielsen's Fifth with the Philadelphia Orchestra in New York.

The gramophone likewise played an important part in the promotion of Nielsen's music. Tuxen and the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra made the first recordings of Nielsen's Third Symphony (Decca, 1946) and of the Fifth (HMV, 1950). Thomas Jensen and the same forces made the first recordings of Nielsen's First (1952), Second (1947) and Sixth (1952), while Grøndahl made the first recording of the Fourth in 1951, also with the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Like Grøndahl, and particularly Jensen, Tuxen also recorded a substantial amount of Danish and Nordic music. For Decca he recorded Nielsen's *Helios Overture*, Sibelius's Fifth Symphony and *Finlandia*, Grieg's *Lyric Suite* and *Two Elegiac Melodies*, and works by Johan Svendsen and Svend S. Schultz. For Tono he recorded Grieg's *Symphonic Dances* and *Norwegian Dances* as well as the *Piano Concerto*, with Victor Schiøler as soloist; all three recordings were subsequently issued in the United States by Mercury. The above-mentioned 1950 recording of Nielsen's Fifth came on HMV, for whom Tuxen also recorded the Prelude to Act II of *Saul and David* and music by the Norwegian composer Harald Sæverud from his incidental music to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Nielsen's *Little Suite for Strings* was recorded for Columbia. In addition, Tuxen made a number of recordings for Polyphon, mainly of Danish repertoire, including Nielsen's Third Symphony, which was also issued by Decca, and the Prelude to Act II of *Maskarade*. Among his recordings of non-Nordic repertoire were, in addition to the Decca recordings mentioned above, Tono recordings of Stravinsky's suite from *The Firebird*, Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto* with Victor Schiøler, and Bruch's *Violin Concerto* with Endre Wolf, the Tchaikovsky and Bruch recordings also being issued by Mercury in the United States. Tuxen and Schiøler also recorded an abridged version of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for Polyphon.

Beyond this, there were concerts and studio productions for Danish Radio, alongside Tuxen's international activities that might well have gained further momentum had he not been struck down, in the mid-1950s, by the cancer that claimed his life far too soon. Active almost to the very end, he died in Copenhagen on 28 August 1957.

Apart from his pioneering advocacy of Carl Nielsen (and of jazz), Erik Tuxen's name has generally been associated with the brilliant and technically demanding orchestral repertoire (not least Russian and French music) and with modern music, including that of contemporary

Danish composers, rather than with the Austro-German classics. The Danish Biographical Encyclopaedia, for instance, records that 'a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony failed ... completely for him – but it helped to reveal his limitations and to underline where his real strength lay'.

Against this background, it may come as something of a surprise to discover that the surviving performances of Brahms's four symphonies reveal Erik Tuxen as not merely a competent Brahms conductor, but a truly outstanding one.

Brahms is both a Romantic and a Classicist, and for that very reason his music can be convincingly performed in many different ways. Some conductors linger lovingly over the details and allow themselves considerable freedom with tempo, while others illuminate the music's underlying structure and keep tempo fluctuations to a minimum. Some place the main emphasis on the gravitas, restraint and melancholy warmth of Brahms's music; others on the fire and passion that are equally part of it.

Tuxen belongs emphatically to the 'objective' school, in the sense that he treats the composer's markings with respect and places particular emphasis on the architectural structure of the music. Yet his objectivity goes hand in hand with passion and warmth – and with a remarkable intensity and momentum. His tempi are almost invariably on the fast side, and he maintains them with striking steadfastness. At the same time, he shapes the melodic material with such a natural sense of cantabile that his firm rhythmic pulse never comes across as rigid. One cannot help wondering whether it is the jazz musician Tuxen who is quietly making his presence felt in the background.

A major reason why Tuxen's Brahms interpretations are so convincing is the playing of the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra. The fact that, around 1950, the orchestra ranked among the finest in Europe by the technical standards of the day does not mean that the playing was without the occasional blemish (orchestral playing has come a long way since then in terms of faultless execution). Yet, through its collaboration with Fritz Busch – himself a pupil of the conductor Fritz Steinbach, who was closely associated with Brahms – the orchestra developed an exceptionally deep affinity with Brahms's musical language, which remained part of the orchestra's inheritance, and indeed of its sense of identity, long after Busch's death.

It is also highly likely that Tuxen was directly influenced by Busch. The characteristics of

Busch's Brahms style are strikingly similar to those used above to describe Tuxen's, and in Copenhagen Tuxen had ample opportunity to hear Busch's interpretations, become familiar with them, and learn from them.

A particularly revealing example of the close affinity between the two conductors' approaches to Brahms is the performance of the Fourth Symphony given on 10 November 1949. Not only do the timings of the four movements correspond almost exactly to those of Fritz Busch's 1950 performance with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, there is a striking similarity in the way the musical argument itself is handled. In the first movement, for example, both Fritz Busch and Erik Tuxen allow the music to unfold as a continuous stream, with extremely little rubato, yet without making the performance sound in the least businesslike or mechanical. Where most conductors begin the movement somewhat below the basic tempo, with frequent changes of gear and Luftpausen along the way, Busch and Tuxen are up to speed from the outset, and the music then flies arrow-like through the air to the final bar. The result is that a movement which, in less assured hands, can easily lose momentum and seem episodic emerges instead as a remarkably cohesive whole.

The Second Symphony, too, allows for a direct comparison between Tuxen and Busch – in this case, with both conductors having worked with the same orchestra.

Busch had recorded the symphony with the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra for HMV in 1947, in a performance that ranks among the finest the work has ever received. Four years later, in 1951, the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra was invited to perform at the Royal Festival Hall, and two concerts were planned, one of them with Busch conducting Brahms's Second Symphony. The concert was scheduled for 21 September 1951, but on 14 September the 61-year-old Busch died unexpectedly of a heart attack in London. Tuxen was called upon to take over the concert, which was fortunately recorded on tape.

Here, too, there is a striking resemblance between the interpretations of the two conductors. The timings are remarkably close, and in both performances the music is propelled forward with great energy and momentum. Busch offers slightly more warmth and tenderness, placing greater emphasis on the work's late-summer glow, whereas Tuxen gives a more intense and explosive performance – qualities further accentuated by differences in the two recordings, with the timpani more prominently placed in the sound picture in Tuxen's recording. One may wonder whether this additional intensity – which some listeners will welcome, others consider

slightly too much of a good thing – was partly a response to the tragic circumstances that had placed Tuxen rather than Busch on the podium that evening.

The observations concerning the Second and Fourth Symphonies should not lead us to regard Tuxen as a mere epigone of Busch. A comparison of Tuxen's performance of the First Symphony on 22 November 1951 with the surviving recording of Busch conducting the same work with the New York Philharmonic in 1942 reveals clear differences, both in the timings of the individual movements and in their relative proportions. The same applies within the movements themselves.

Apart from the famous tune in the finale, which is taken at a surprisingly brisk tempo, Busch thus adopts a notably broad and weighty approach throughout the symphony. Tuxen's interpretation, by contrast, is more consistent with the approach the two conductors have shared in the Second and Fourth Symphonies. His first movement, though, is still weightier than one might perhaps expect, with tempi closer to mainstream; he also allows himself a few rhetorical touches. The remainder of the symphony is again characterised by relatively brisk tempi, and in the finale he gives priority to structural coherence over dramatic contrasts. All in all, it is a slightly more measured performance than those of the Fourth and, above all, the Second.

As for the Third Symphony, no recording of Busch's interpretation survives, so no comparison with Tuxen is possible. And given the differences between the two conductors' approaches to the First Symphony, we cannot, much as we might have wished to, infer from Tuxen's performance how Busch conducted the work. What we can establish is that Tuxen's performance, given at a concert in Flensburg on 6 May 1951, displays an approach consistent with his interpretations of the other three symphonies, particularly the Second and Fourth: strong forward momentum combined with warmth and organic phrasing. In the finale above all, Tuxen unleashes the music's full power, to very convincing effect, and it is evident throughout that he does not belong to the large category of conductors for whom the Third Symphony remains an unsolved mystery. On the contrary, the music unfolds organically and with seeming inevitability under his baton. A performance of the work given by Tuxen and the same forces in Stockholm on 16 October 1956 has also survived. It is essentially the same conception as the 1951 performance, if slightly more measured.

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Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

CD 1

Symphony No. 1

in C minor, Op. 68 41:45

[1] I. Un poco sostenuto – Allegro –
Meno allegro 12:49

[2] II. Andante sostenuto 8:36

[3] III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso 4:10

[4] IV. Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non
troppo, ma con brio – Più allegro 16:00*Live Concert, November 11, 1951**The Danish Radio Concert Hall, Copenhagen*

Symphony No. 4

in E minor, Op. 98 37:03

[5] I. Allegro ma non troppo 10:50

[6] II. Andante moderato 10:53

[7] III. Allegro giocoso – Poco meno presto –
Tempo I 5:41[8] IV. Allegro energico e passionato –
Più allegro 9:30*Live Concert, November 10, 1949**The Danish Radio Concert Hall, Copenhagen*

CD 2

Symphony No. 3

in F major, Op. 90 30:50

[1] I. Allegro con brio – Un poco sostenuto –
Tempo I 9:05

[2] II. Andante 7:49

[3] III. Poco allegretto 5:45

[4] IV. Allegro 8:02

*Live Concert, May 6, 1951**Deutsches Haus, Flensburg, Germany*

Symphony No. 2

in D major, Op. 73 34:29

[5] I. Allegro non troppo 13:00

[6] II. Adagio non troppo – L'istesso tempo,
ma grazioso 8:42[7] III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino) –
Presto ma non assai 4:27

[8] IV. Allegro con spirito 8:05

*Live Concert, September 21, 1951**The Royal Festival Hall, London, UK*DACOD 1011
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The Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra
Erik Tuxen, conductor