

Brian Elias



# THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT • A TALISMAN • DOUBLES

Tim Mirfin *bass* • BBC Symphony Orchestra • Sir Andrew Davis  
Martyn Brabbins • Jiří Bělohlávek *conductors*



A BBC Recording

# BRIAN ELIAS

**1 THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT** 21'01

BBC Symphony Orchestra  
Sir Andrew Davis *conductor*

**2 A TALISMAN** 20'22

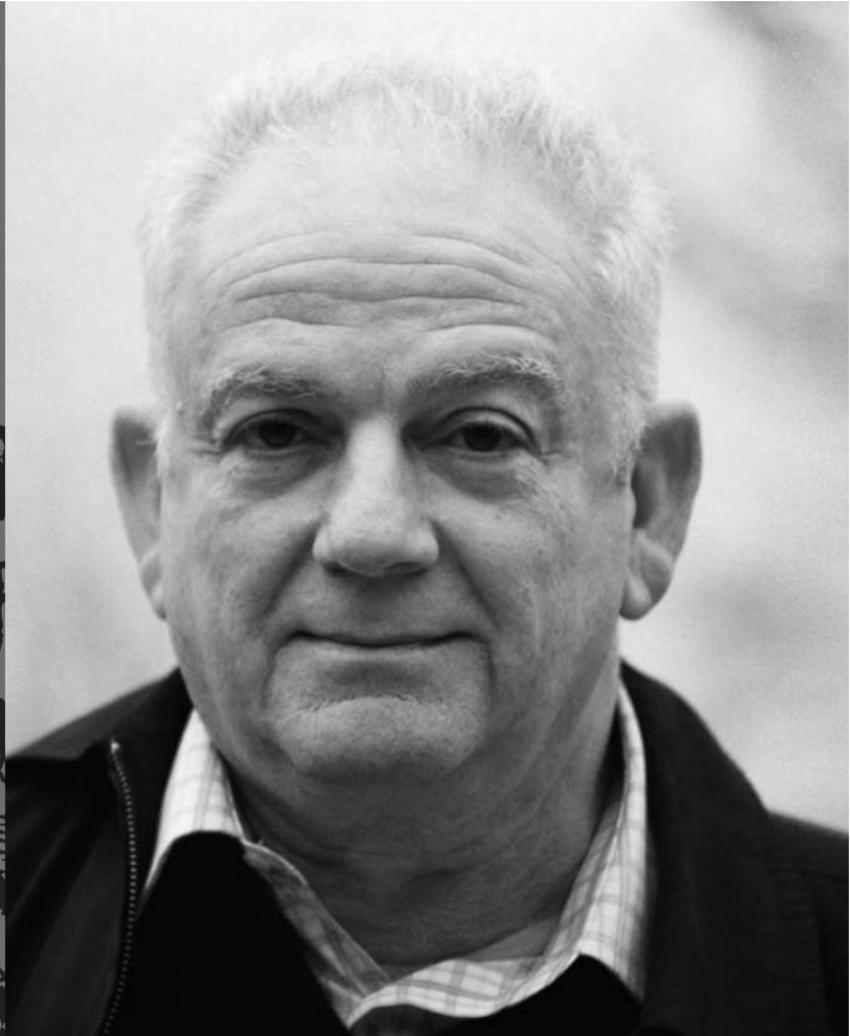
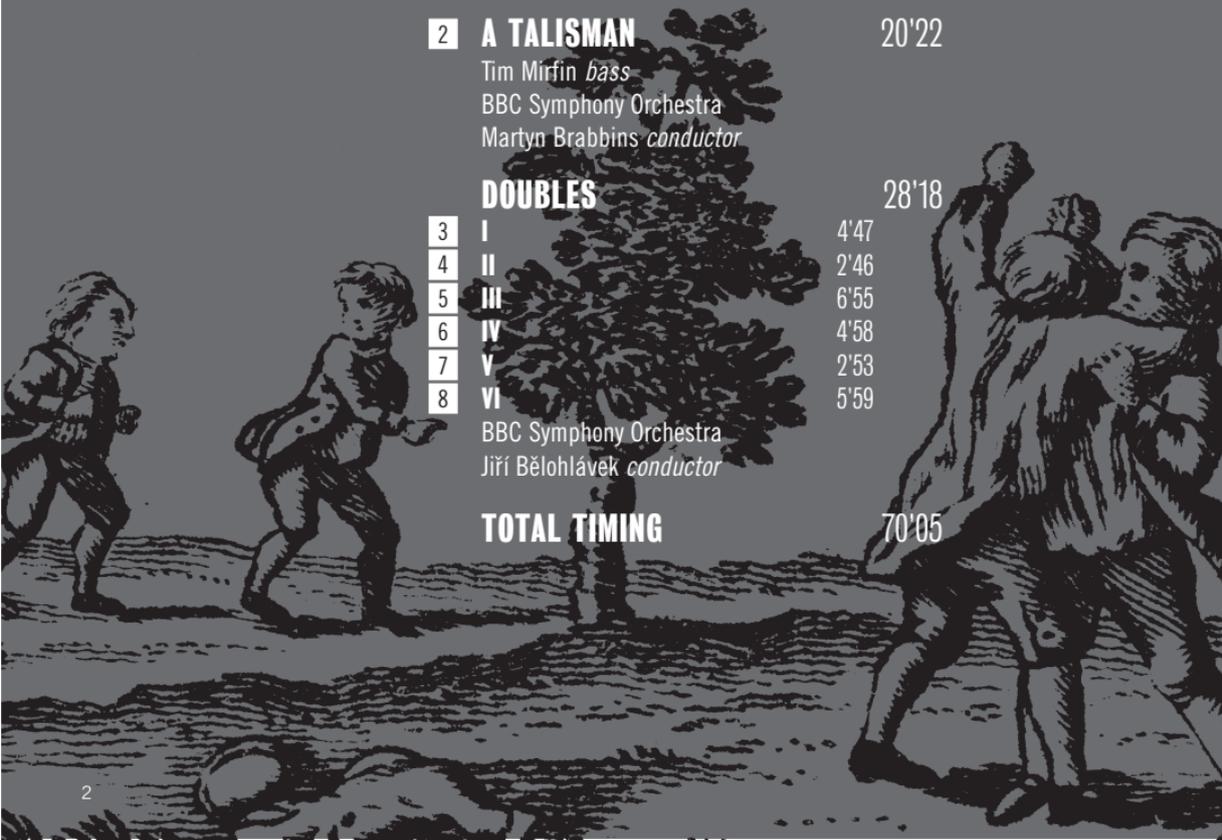
Tim Mirfin *bass*  
BBC Symphony Orchestra  
Martyn Brabbins *conductor*

**DOUBLES** 28'18

<b>3</b>	<b>I</b>	4'47
<b>4</b>	<b>II</b>	2'46
<b>5</b>	<b>III</b>	6'55
<b>6</b>	<b>IV</b>	4'58
<b>7</b>	<b>V</b>	2'53
<b>8</b>	<b>VI</b>	5'59

BBC Symphony Orchestra  
Jiří Bělohlávek *conductor*

**TOTAL TIMING** 70'05



## THE MUSIC OF BRIAN ELIAS INTRODUCTION BY GERARD MCBURNEY

What is so immediately striking about Brian Elias's music is his feeling for surging drama. A recurring feature is the way in which symphonic gestures swirl and rise like waves and shake their crests with a flourish before falling back and yielding to the next in line.

This is what gives his art its narrative power, its restless forward motion. No wonder this composer has been drawn to the ballet and that his impressive works for voice and orchestra have the quality of fragments from an unwritten opera. He is a natural story-teller.

But as so often, what appears at first to be almost off the cuff, a refreshingly instinctive feeling for the effect of how one thing follows another, turns out on closer and repeated hearings to be much more specific. For what gives

structure and sense to Elias's waves of sound is not merely the music's rise and fall, but the composer's fondness for one of the most ancient structures in music – call and refrain. We can hear this elemental pattern – statement, response; statement, response – everywhere in his music. Over pulsing chords, a horn launches a fragment of virtuosic melody which is then shouted down by the whole orchestra. A soaring arc of violin writing is answered by exuberant cries from trumpets and high woodwinds. A few eerie chords from a harp are echoed by a cloud of string harmonics.

This simple idea – of a priest, a cantor, a leader giving utterance to a musical and verbal image, and a chorus or congregation answering and echoing what they have just

heard – inevitably conjures up associations with liturgy and ritual. In the three pieces in this recording, we hear Elias playing with such associations in strikingly different ways. In *The House that Jack Built*, he draws on the late Peter and Iona Opie's revelations about the shape and significance of traditional English nursery rhymes and playground games, to create a nightmare vision of innocence assaulted by experience. In *A Talisman*, an ancient Jewish text of intense personal significance offers an emotional starting point from which to explore dramatic antiphonies between soloist and chamber orchestra. And in *Doubles*, the composer not only delights in the symphonic possibilities of 'call and refrain' from bar to bar, but makes the entire work depend on this

same idea, by treating three whole movements as 'calls' and three others as 'echoes' or 'responses'.

It is hardly surprising that Brian Elias is sensitive to the allure and influence of ancient liturgies and rituals. With ancestral roots in the ancient Jewish community in Baghdad, a childhood in Bombay (now Mumbai), and a long creative life in London, he may be said to have experienced a wider diversity of cultural, religious and musical traditions than most of us will ever know. But he has never been a folklorist. What interests him in the patterns that he draws on is their dramatic force, the fact that without our ever being able to predict where the music is going, we know that it will sweep us onwards in the story that he tells.

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## THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT NOTES BY BRIAN ELIAS

The playground and all its rumbustiousness rather than the more gentle nursery is the setting for *The House That Jack Built*. The moment to moment construction attempts to mimic the furious and manic activity of the playground with its rapid succession of games, chants, calls, jeers, taunts and jibes all repeated frequently at random. Many of these calls impress themselves on our memories instantly and for life, first by their rhythmic force and then by their obsessive quality, which like all ritual acquires unexplainable and magical meaning. This aspect is one of the main building blocks of the piece. It is the manner in which these rhymes and games are made up and played, as much as their often bizarre imagery and glorious nonsense, which provide background for *The House That*

*Jack Built*. The work is not programmatic in any way, and with the exception of one well-known and easily recognisable musical catchphrase, I have not quoted from or referred to any particular rhymes or games. The single quotation is sounded very early in the piece and generates much of the subsequent material.

*The House That Jack Built* is made of three main sections. The first, which is the longest, already hints at the curious, cumulative structure of the archetypal nursery rhyme from which the piece takes its title; pairs of episodes of gradually increasing length build towards the central point of the work. This short central section takes its form directly from the construction of the nursery rhyme; 'lines' are added successively to an

initial short phrase, creating 'stanzas' which get longer and longer:

This is the house  
that Jack Built.

This is the malt  
That lay in the house  
that Jack Built.

This is the rat,  
That ate the malt  
That lay in the house  
that Jack built.

This is the cat,  
That killed the rat ...

The last section recapitulates earlier material but enters a different world by using more gentle orchestration and lighter colouring. Many of the same games are played just as quickly as before, but the mood is

transformed (as so often happens in the playground), and the piece ends as suddenly and as abruptly as a playground may be deserted.

*The House That Jack Built* was commissioned by the BBC for performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra during the 2001-02 winter season.



## A TALISMAN

The amulet that provides the text for this work was intended to protect against the Evil Eye, and was made in Kurdistan in the 19th century. It is made of silver, is inscribed in Hebrew on both sides and was given to my late mother in 1969 by her uncle, whose family emigrated from Kurdistan to Bombay in the middle of the 19th century. In an accompanying letter, he wrote, in his inimitable English, 'I decided in my heart this holy inestimable Talisman will afford you Relief and check future miseries. I hope it acted favourably for you.'

I became fascinated by this strange object and found that the text was highly typical of Jewish amulets. It quotes the names of several angels, lines from Psalm 91 and single words that invoke whole chapters of the Old Testament,

such as 'Echah' ('How'), the first word of the Book of Lamentations, and 'Eheyeh' ('I AM THAT I AM'), the seminal words spoken to Moses at the Burning Bush. Many other words and phrases consist of anagrams, acronyms, inversions, palindromes and acrostics of sacred texts and holy names. Some words remain untranslatable as their significance has long been lost, and yet others may quite simply be mistakes made by the engraver. Most importantly, it became apparent to me that rather than being an object of witchcraft and magic, the amulet was, above all, an object of devotion and a heartfelt, passionate and most moving appeal for help.

The work is divided into two continuous sections entitled RECTO and VERSO so that the

outer form of the piece imitates the two sides of the amulet; the second section reflects the music of the first part, and is slightly shorter. Since the text is almost entirely made up of single words and names, the baritone often has a declamatory role although the second part of the piece does contain more lyrical and extended phrases for the voice. As the text is so dominated by angel names, I have given the trumpet, an instrument very strongly associated with Gabriel and other angels, a prominent part.

I am much indebted to Shaul Shaked, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for first transcribing the text from the amulet and for his expert guidance. Jeremy

Schonfield, Mason Lecturer at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, spent an enormous amount of time with me, going through the text word by word and revealing its riches; I am so very grateful to him for vividly illuminating not only the meaning of the words but their myriad associations. My thanks also to Naomi Shepherd, who was so helpful with the translations.

*A Talisman* was commissioned by the Cheltenham International Festival of Music, and first performed by Paul Putnins and the National Youth Orchestra Sinfonietta conducted by Geoffrey Paterson on 18th July 2004 in the Bacon Theatre, Dean Close School, Cheltenham.

The work is dedicated to my brother Ivan.

## A TALISMAN – TEXT

### RECTO

- 1 ADONAI SHADAI
- 2 Avartiel Shamriel Yefiel Shathniel
- 3 Sussiel Azriel Tseva'ot Metatron
- 4 Amhiel SHADAI yohach calach yohach
- 5 “lo tira mipachad laila mechets ya'uf”
  
- 6 Bethuel Yehemiel “yipol mitsidechah elef u'revavah
- 7 miminechah” Atriel Tzadiel Shalkiel
- 8 Thariel Unha'el Uriel Refa'el Gavriel
- 9 Micha'el Nuriel elem sit l'afor
- 10 malki zan shatur azifo tinina
- 11 ufira yotash

### VERSO

- 12 ADONAI
- 13 ADONAI ADONAI hoveh echah Sumiel g'hADONAI
- 14 Hiphkadiel eheyeh Busthariel Huvushel
- 15 Yeho'el kaphkaphkli oosafterin ADONAI
- 16 Tseva'ot Chai v'kayam ya'ADONAI
- 17 Hai Hai Hai sai'yada ADONAI hopha ADONAI
  
- 18 atah hai yiheye noomiyah ADONAI ADONAI selah
  
- 19 Hasih vehalav Meha'el kiel ADONAI ba'el
- 20 Yekutiel Uriel Hayah'el
- 21 lishmirat neko Amen Netzach Selah Va'ed Ken  
Yehi Ratson

### Note:

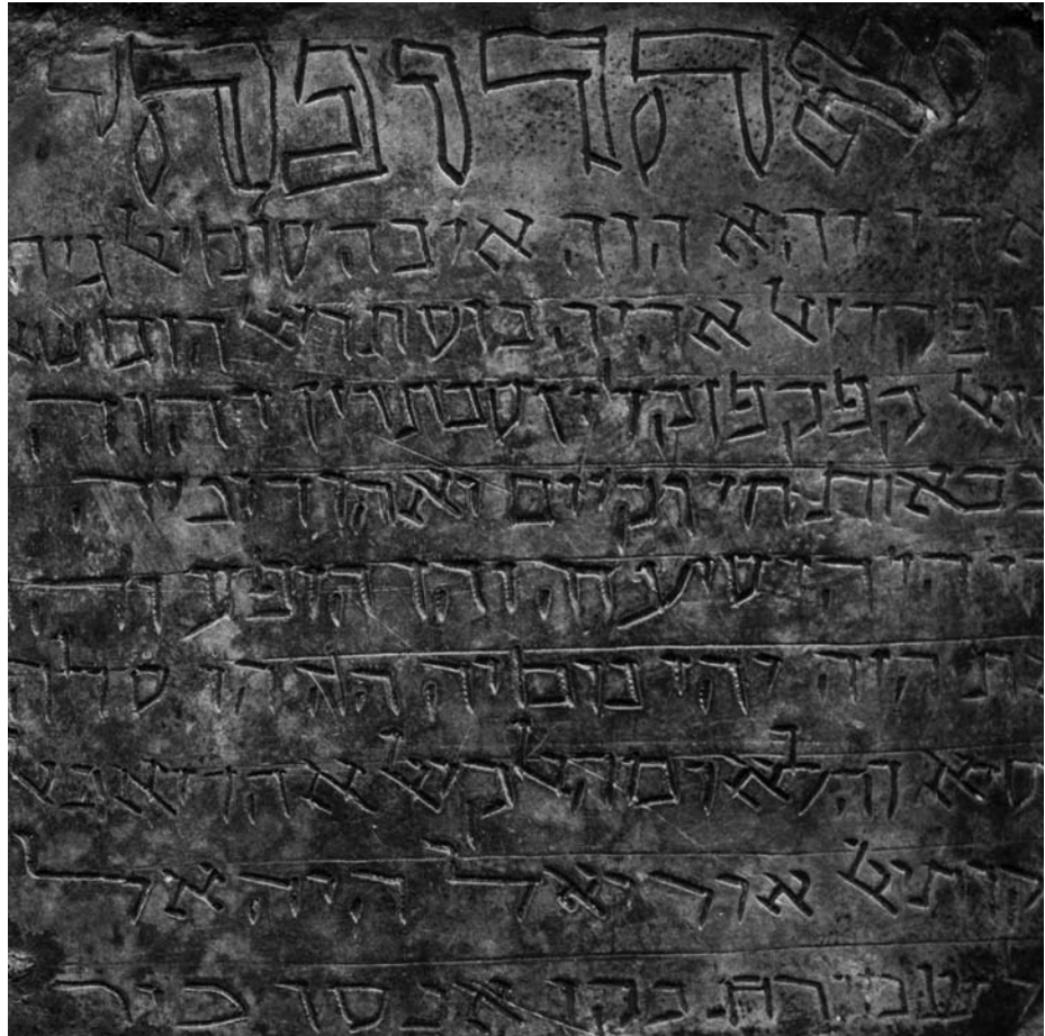
It has not been possible (as yet) to translate or decipher all of the words. Their meaning remains obscure, and they may be obscure names, acrostics of one kind or another (as in line 4), numbers of Kabbalistic significance whose meanings have been lost, or quite simply, mistakes made by the engraver of the amulet. Hyphens are used in the translation simply to clarify and separate quotations of words from different sources.

### RECTO

- 1 Lord God Almighty
- 2 Avartiel Shamriel Yefiel Shathniel
- 3 Sussiel Azriel - Lord of Hosts - Metatron
- 4 Amhiel God Almighty - You may go
- 5 “Thou *shalt* not be afraid for the terror by night;  
*nor* for the arrow that flieth”
  
- 6 Bethuel Yehemiel - “A thousand shall fall at thy  
side, and ten thousand
- 7 at thy right hand” - Atriel Tzadiel Shalkiel
- 8 Thariel Unha'el Uriel Repha'el Gavriel
- 9 Micha'el Nuriel elem sit l'afor
- 10 malki zan shatur azifo tinina
- 11 ufira yotash

### VERSO

- 12 Lord!
- 13 Lord! Lord! Ever present - HOW - Sumiel Lord!
- 14 Hiphkadiel - I AM - Busthariel Huvushel
- 15 Yeho'el kaphkaphkli oosafterin Lord
- 16 Lord of Hosts - Lives and Is - Oh Lord!
- 17 Quickly! Soon! Immediately! Help me! Lord!  
Appear [to me]! Lord!
- 18 You were and will be - His words - Lord -  
Lord - Selah
- 19 Yasih vehalav Meha'el kiel Lord - In God
- 20 Yekutiel Uriel Haya'el
- 21 For protection neko - Amen Eternal Selah  
Evermore - May Such Be His Will



## DOUBLES

The title of this work refers both to the way it is constructed and to the nature of its content. It is a continuous piece made up of six movements, the first three of which are 'doubled' in the same order by the remaining three. In 18th-century keyboard music, the French word *double* had a specific technical meaning, and was used to mean 'a variation, particularly one in which more or less elaborate ornamentation is added to the original melody, while the supporting harmonies [i.e. the bass line] remain the same' (Grove).

In this work, the *forms* of each of the first three movements are doubled by the remaining three, rather than any melodic or harmonic elements, and it is this aspect of the piece that was the

driving principle in its composition. Nevertheless, most of the material for this work is stated in its first few pages, and this material is constantly varied and developed in each of the six pieces.

There is also a further play on the meaning of the title in that each double shows a different aspect of the ideas and character of its original, changing, so to speak, its nature, direction and personality. For example, the first piece starts loudly and spirals inwards towards a quiet ending while its Double, the fourth piece, starts fairly lightly and spirals outwards, increasing relentlessly in force and volume.

*Doubles* was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 for performance by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

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## BRIAN ELIAS

Bombay was Brian Elias's first home, until he was sent to school in England at the age of thirteen. By then he had already composed a fair amount – or rather improvised, as it was not until the need arose to make parts for school performances that Elias began properly writing his ideas down. In 1966 he entered the Royal College of Music, officially studying composition under Humphrey Searle and Bernard Stevens, though it was the experience of 'moonlighting' with the composer Elisabeth Lutyens he found most stimulating. Under Lutyens's influence, Elias produced a Webern-like cantata *La Chevelure*, which made a positive impression at its first hearing in 1968.

After leaving the RCM he produced a number of small-scale works, culminating in the unaccompanied choral *Proverbs of Hell*, based on William Blake. This and a revival of *La Chevelure* gave him the confidence to tackle larger-scale structures: the first significant product was the Petronius setting *Somnia* (1979) for tenor and

orchestra, followed in 1982 by the song cycle *At the Edge of Time*. In *L'Eylah* (1983), he at last felt free to write a large, abstract orchestral work; it was greeted with enthusiasm by audience and critics at its BBC Proms premiere.

*Geranos* for chamber ensemble (1985) confirmed his growing confidence and mastery, as did the vividly atmospheric *Pythikos Nomos (The Law of the Python)*, 1987-8) for alto saxophone and piano. But these were surpassed by Elias's next major work, the orchestral song cycle *Five Songs to Poems by Irina Ratushinskaya* (1989), commissioned by the BBC; it was so well received at its London premiere that it was toured by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, repeated at the 1991 Proms, and later recorded for NMC (on NMC D064).

In 1992 came one of Elias's greatest successes, *The Judas Tree*, a riveting forty-minute score written for the Royal Ballet and choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan, which has

remained securely in the Royal Ballet's repertory ever since; although written to be danced, it is scarcely less impressive performed purely as an orchestral work. For all his achievement as a composer of large-scale works, however, Elias has not forgotten his early liking for music of a more intimate scale and manner: two recent successes include *Three Songs* (2003) on poems by Christina Rossetti for alto voice and harp, and a piece for solo clarinet, *Birds Practise Songs in Dreams* (2004).

Elias has never been a prolific composer, and all his work – from ambitious orchestral scores to the tiniest instrumental pieces – is executed with meticulous care. Yet the result is music that never sounds merely 'careful'. *The House That Jack*

*Built* (2001) is bold, dazzlingly inventive and full of dancing energy. His 2004 commission for the Cheltenham Festival was *A Talisman*, premiered by the National Youth Orchestra Sinfonietta and Paul Putnins, and scored for bass-baritone and small orchestra; and a more recent orchestral work is *Doubles* (2009), commissioned by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He has recently completed *Electra Mourns*, setting a speech from Sophocles's *Electra* for mezzo-soprano, cor anglais and strings.

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*Sir Andrew Davis is an exclusive artist of Chandos Records and appears with their kind permission.*

Information about the artists on this recording can be found on NMC's website: [www.nmcrec.co.uk](http://www.nmcrec.co.uk)

*The House that Jack Built*, performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and conductor Sir Andrew Davis, was recorded and broadcast live by BBC Radio 3 on 22 March 2002.

Orchestra leader  
Recording engineer  
Producer

**MICHAEL DAVIS**  
**NEIL PEMBERTON**  
**ANN MCKAY**

*Doubles*, performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and conductor Jiří Bělohlávek, was recorded by BBC Radio 3 on 16 May 2009 and first broadcast on 2 July 2009.

Orchestra leader  
Recording engineer  
Producer

**STEPHEN BRYANT**  
**NEIL PEMBERTON**  
**ANN MCKAY**

*A Talisman* was recorded at Studio 1, BBC Maida Vale on 27-28 January 2011

Solo trumpet  
Orchestra leader  
Balance engineer  
Assistant Recording Engineer  
Producer

**JONATHAN HOLLAND**  
**ANDREW HAVERON**  
**SIMON HANCOCK**  
**ADELE CONLIN**  
**ANN MCKAY**

Tim Mirfin's language coach for *A Talisman* was Ruth Sonntag.

Executive Producer for NMC

**COLIN MATTHEWS**

Cover image & Graphic design  
Image overleaf Silver amulet belonging to Brian Elias;  
Photo by Pearce Marchbank RDI

**FRANÇOIS HALL**

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