

Delius: Florida Suite, Dance Rhapsody, Over the Hills and Far Away
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Sir Thomas Beecham, Conductor
Seraphim S-60212

In the history of modern English music, the Solano orange grove has attained a mythological place comparable to that of the vale of Tempe or Nemisian grove in ancient cultures.

—Hubert Foss

If you took this record to North Florida, to a place about forty miles south of Jacksonville and a somewhat shorter distance west of Saint Augustine, where the old Spanish trail from Saint Augustine to Pensacola crosses the Saint John's river at Picolata, if you took it there, where the river is about three miles wide and the live oaks and pines, and even the palms that line the sandy shore, are hung with Spanish moss, if you took it there and played it in the morning and at noon and in the evening, you might appreciate the rendering power of descriptive music for the first time.

The young man who wrote the music was on something of an odyssey there in 1884 and 1885. He came to grow oranges, and left determined to compose. Two things he encountered in the interim prepared him for a life in music. The primitive beauty and calm along the Saint John's—qualities which remain to this day—released in him the inner resolve he would need, and the lessons he received, from a Brooklyn organist/teacher met in Jacksonville, provided the fundamental techniques of the trade. To the end of his life he would maintain that this was the only instruction from which he had benefited. Two years after his return to Europe, in 1888, he wrote a piece of music called *Florida*, a fond remembrance, dedicated to the people of that state, which ostensibly, takes the major portion of a day by the Saint John's and translates it into 35 minutes of orchestral music.

Were Frederick Delius not now recognized as a major British composer, a unique voice in the music of the first quarter of the twentieth century, it is uncertain if this *Florida Suite*, his first orchestral work, would be known to us today. The story too, of this 22 year old Englishman and his stay in the tropics, might be lost to us. Solano Grove, the very site where he briefly tended his oranges, was indeed lost for a time. It was not until after Delius' death in 1934, that historically and culturally conscious Jacksonvillians undertook to uncover and verify the site of the four room cabin and the giant live oak—90 feet in span—about ten miles north of Palatka on the east side of the river.

Frederick Delius though, is marked out in history. If there ever was question about his enduring status, it is dispelled now, as a new generation of interpreters perform his works and record them anew. Connected with the man, indelibly, is this geography of the South. Its enduring acoustic dimension he captured in a manner bound to command your respect for the pictorial power of music even if you know the region only in the imagination.

The *Florida Suite*, "Four Tropical Scenes for Orchestra," is a translation, a transcription and an impression. It translates soundless events into musical form (The procedure may actually be one of discovering the quiet music in all natural processes), it transcribes the sounds of nature and of man, and through the artist's experience, transmuted in his creative soul, it captures the feeling of the place. For his translation Delius could work from precedent. Composers had set down upon the

orchestra before, notably Grieg (*Peer Gynt Suite*), whom Delius knew after he returned to Europe. It was Grieg in fact, convinced of the young man's talent, who finally reconciled Delius' father to Frederick's musical career. There was precedent too for music of rivers and waters, which runs, with characteristic meters and melodies, throughout the history of the art. The storm which occurs at "Sunset," in the third scene, is a storm in the tradition of Beethoven and Rossini, and I might add, a wonderful rendering of the

CLASSICS

thunderbursts that sweep across the southernmost state, regularly in summer at that time of day. This sole disturbance, in a predominantly placid portrait, is both translation and transcription. Delius transcribed the sounds of nature. The flute and oboe at "Daybreak" are the birds of that hour. More importantly though, he transcribed the sounds of man...of Black men. In this century, it has become a commonplace to transfer the music of the American Negro to the concert realm, but Delius must have

the setting. The timeless serenity and expanse of the scene on the Saint John's can be felt in the breadth of the themes and the gradualness of their development, in the gradual expansion and contraction of dynamics, and in the composer's sensitive use of orchestral colors, a sensitivity, throughout his life, particularly suited to depicting scenes of nature. Even the form of the piece lends itself to this feeling of timelessness, with the final scene, "At Night," returning to the theme of the opening. Dawn to dark on the river,

and nothing really has changed.

To my knowledge this is the only commercial recording ever made of the *Florida Suite*. When it appeared on Capitol, fifteen years ago (?), flamingos and oranges, in watercolor, were on the jacket. Now, on Seraphim, the cover carries an engraving of the steamship *Osceola* chugging down the Saint John's. However packaged, this sole performance can serve indefinitely, because it is Delius conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, and when you're talking Delius, that's all you've got to



been among the first "serious" composers to encounter their songs, and to use them in his compositions. He is said to have spent much of his time at Solano Grove, sitting on the veranda or in a boat on the river, having one of the Black men whom he employed pick the banjo and sing to him the songs that were neither written or recorded. He was much taken with this music, and with the music he heard drifting across the Saint John's, sung by Blacks who worked the steamers. Even in his later works are found themes he heard then. In this early program work, the sounds of man on the land are heard in two Negro dances: *La Calinda*, at "Daybreak," and at "Sunset," *Near the Plantation*.

The remaining part of this sound picture is Delius' unique response to

know. Not only was Beecham a personal friend of the composer, who played his music throughout the world when no one else would—who recorded much of it—Beecham carried the man's cause from the podium to the desk, and penned a biography of the composer, a damn good one. The album notes are the same as those on the Capitol release, only now with new copyright, Felix Aprahamian writes of the man's music and Sir Thomas: "For half a century Sir Thomas was not only its incomparable interpreter but also its virtual guardian."

The two shorter and later works of Delius which fill out the disc are subjected to perhaps even more of this understanding and devotion because they are more characteristically Delian. That is to say they are more

rhapsodic, less traditionally developmental, comprised more of the shifting textures and harmonies that are the trademark of his mature output. *Over the Hills and Far Away*, written between 1895 and 1897, was begun in Paris and completed at Grez-Sur-Loing, where the composer lived from a time shortly before the turn of the century until his death. *The Dance Rhapsody No. 2*, from 1916, was also written there.

I've been awaiting the reissue of this record for a long time; now all the Florida friends can hear the music of their state. Of course it's not just for them; the music is too good, too well performed for that. Don't just buy this record though. Get the other volume of Beecham conducting Delius on Seraphim—budget records both—go comprehensive and treasure this wonderful collection of the music of the master of Solano Grove.

—A.D. PENCHANSKY