

GOING ON RECORD

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THE DELIUS AFFAIR

THIS past April the Opera Society of Washington presented, in the opera house of the Kennedy Center, the first American performance of Frederick Delius' *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, which was composed in 1901. Seventy-one years is a long time to wait for such a premiere, particularly since Delius is not exactly an unknown composer. The opera has long been the subject of rather widespread curiosity, which was, perhaps, more heightened than satisfied by the twenty-four 78-rpm sides of the Delius Fellowship-sponsored recording in the late Forties. The Washington performance, all in all, was worth some waiting, but it also brought out quite clearly why we had to wait, and raised once again the whole case of the stature of Delius as a composer.

A certain number of credits are due before getting into the problem itself. The Washington production was ably conducted by Paul Callaway (there were a few fluffs in the orchestra, but the balances and tempos were good, and the "sound" was right); John Stewart as Sali, Patricia Wells as Vreli, John Reardon as the Dark Fiddler, and the remaining members of the cast handled their parts sympathetically and well. The production, which was directed by Frank Corsaro, with scenery, films, and projections by Ronald Chase, was exceedingly effective in most places.

It was one of those double-projection jobs—with the screen at the rear of the stage and the scrim in front—much like that for Ginastera's *Beatrix Cenci*, and we were treated to copious running views of atmosphere-laden tree tops, shrubbery, and other natural phenomena. The fact that this worked, and worked as well as it did, is enough to tell us that without it *A Village Romeo and Juliet* might not work. For in the music too there is far more scene painting than there is either action or conscious reflection, and, tellingly, there is more music in the orchestral parts than in the vocal.

What other opera can one name whose musical highpoint is neither an aria nor an ensemble nor even a chorus, but an orchestral interlude which would ordinarily (but not here) be played with the curtain down?

The work, then, is not really an opera at all; it is a tone poem for orchestra, with vocal obbligatos which superimpose a brief, human story over the lush but impersonal nature painting. The fact that this two-hour tone poem can be staged is nothing unusual in this day of multimedia art, but experiencing the work in this way makes it evident why so few in the past were courageous or foolish enough to present it as an opera.

Even multi-media presentation has its difficulties, however, and there were several places where Mr. Corsaro's production simply did not work. The first



John Stewart and Patricia Wells as the unfortunate lovers, Sali and Vreli, in the Opera Society of Washington's production of Frederick Delius' opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*.

was a mere matter of getting hung up on the visual material without properly relating it to the music: a staccato Allegro of treetops, for example, does not complement the Andante of the "Walk to the Paradise Garden," but detracts from it. It was not the idea that was faulty, but the visual tempo. A second defect is of more complicated structure. There is a scene at a fair at the beginning of Act 2, which calls dramatically for a swirl of aural and visual events, the necessary bustle, to make the scene come alive. Delius was probably incapable of writing such music. What is needed, of course, is the sense of polyrhythmic motion, and even apart from the fact that Delius was no master of any sort of polyphony, his bass lines are so dilatory that real motion beyond a slow amble is rare in his music. The projections could have compensated for this with a visual swirl of events, but, alas, here they simply fastened on a background and stayed there, leaving what movement there was to the pitifully small gestural capabilities of the figures on stage. The fair died.

LEST I seem to have been unduly negative thus far about Delius' achievement, let me take the other, more important side. The most astonishing thing about *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is simply how rich the score is in memorable music. One does not wait patiently for an attractive melody or an intriguing harmonic progression; they come at you from all sides at virtually every moment. And that one hears this in an opera house only intensifies the feeling. (Incidentally, the opera sounds far less Wagnerian in "live" performance than it seemed to on records.) In other words, though the work may not be a masterpiece of musical theater, it is a very wonderful piece of music and immediately brings to mind the question: "Why haven't I heard this music more?" Why indeed? That Delius was incapable of writing a fair scene like Stravinsky's or an opera like one of Strauss' is no reason to dismiss him.

Granted, Delius was capable of writing only certain kinds of music. There are not many works of his that are out-and-out failures, but flaws surface occasionally even in the successful works. And, of course, there are certain types of works that he rarely, or never, attempted to write. But there must be room in the musical pantheon for composers who do even a few things very well.

Delius certainly was one. The characteristic harmonies of his music, its summery, even flow, its tranquility, its lush sensuality express one of music's unique personalities, a talent not very broad, but sufficiently deep that the word "genius" seems hardly misapplied. Angel Records will release a new recording of *A Village Romeo and Juliet* this fall, and I hope that its joyful reception will not be limited to "specialists."