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DELIUS AND AMERICA

By ERIC BLOM

TO write about Frederick Delius nowadays is to fulfill the poignant duty of discussing a composer who belongs to all intents and purposes to bygone days. The callous journalist, of course, is accustomed to preparing obituaries in the past tense about people who are still alive, but the case of Delius is sadly complicated by the fact that, in spite of his being still among us, the one thing that has ever made any of us write about him—his music—has already become history. At his home in the sleepy and romantic little French village of Grez-sur-Loing, near Fontainebleau, where he has lived for twenty-eight years, he lingers, too ill for work.

If to the world of music Delius, the man, is no more, that world could well afford to offer him at least this consolation: to give him, without further delay, that recognition as an artist which proverbially belongs to the genius of a certain type only when he is no longer with us. Although, in some parts of Europe at least, acknowledgments of his worth are not lacking, his is still in a peculiar degree the loneliness that has been the earthly share of so many of the most original artistic figures of unusual eminence.

The position is not inexplicable. It is due not only to the characteristic reticence of Delius's art itself, but also to the fact that, practically considered—or let us say it frankly, commercially considered—his attitude towards the world was always disdainful to the point of perversity and improvident to the verge of folly. Domiciled in France for nearly three decades, in Paris his name is a blank among the ordinary concert-goers and a curiosity among musicians. In cultivating music lovingly in his quiet riverside home at Grez, he fatally omitted to cultivate the musicians of the capital: the result is an artistic ostracism as rigid as only the injured vanity of Parisian art-circles can decree it.

Elsewhere the neglect is less deliberate, but, based merely on ignorance, it is no less complete. Germany, Austria and Great Britain with, to a small extent, Holland and Scandinavia, are the only European countries where Delius may be said to be taken at his proper value by a section of the musical community. Even there, perhaps, half of his success—and it is never a popular success

Frederick Delius.

(In 1914.)

—is due to extra-musical causes, such as his English birth, his German extraction, his Dutch descent, his love of Scandinavia and association with many eminent Northern artists, his marriage with the Danish writer, Jelka Rosen. True, wherever Delius is known, he has an enthusiastic following for purely æsthetic reasons, but a following picked only from those who have a certain elective affinity with this hypersensitive artist.

In America, as I have lately heard from various people who know, including an eminent critic whom I found rather guardedly appreciative, Delius has, I will not say no vogue, for that he has nowhere, but scarcely a hold on the most widely cultivated musicians. It is chiefly my curiosity as to the causes of this neglect, and the hope that I may elicit some information on the subject, that makes me write on this composer in an American journal. My fancy that the explanation may be sought in matters of temperament rather than in the realm of æsthetics, as it certainly is in Southern Europe, for instance, has quite recently been confirmed by a view expressed by the critic of the "Philadelphia Public Ledger," who writes thus on the violoncello Concerto:—

> The work is exceedingly free, diverging from the concerto form in many respects. Even more fatal, however, to its effect upon an audience is an utter lack of that contrast which is more necessary in a composition for the violoncello than in a work for the violin or piano, on account of the more limited tonal effects possible.[1] The mood—one of revery—is the same throughout, and twenty minutes of it is too long.

I no more wish to assert that this is a typically American example of comment upon a work by Delius than I should care to pronounce that modern hustle is an exclusively American disease. Nor have I any desire to abuse an ultra-practical mode of living except in relation to art, for it may be a disease only in the sense that the pearl is a complaint to the oyster. That the last sentence here quoted is an aberration of judgment induced by hustle can, however, hardly be doubted. For the harassed critic, as for the harassed business man, which in a sense the critic must of necessity be, time acquires an inflated value. In his rush from opera house to concert hall and thence to the editorial office, he fatally contracts the habit of saving a minute here, another there, a third elsewhere—and to what end? He hoards minutes in order to have several minutes to spare, from which in turn he may be able to save one or two, and so on *ad*

[1]Some haste is betrayed here. The violoncello has a wider range and vastly greater color variety than the violin. Composers who write string-quartets continually find how difficult it is to restrain the bass instrument to its proper functions.

infinitum. What wonder then, where every single moment is thus doubly and trebly precious to him, that he cannot conceive how anyone can have twenty minutes to waste on revery, upon dreams, even in the somnolent backwaters of the Grez-sur-Loings of this earth, where no sub-editor waits for copy, and where even publishers do not clamor with indecorous haste for one's works. The dream may be lovely beyond the experience of anyone but a composer whose peculiar gift and chief distinction lies precisely in the direction of lyrical contemplation: in one of the world's big cities, where a newspaper's time and the tide of affairs in general wait for no music critic, it is all too liable to be passed by unheeded unless it be measured accurately to the tabloid quantity of musing set aside by the busy citizen. The misunderstanding may be the composer's fault for not having dispensed the allowance correctly, but it is distinctly the hearer's loss. Except for the wrong measure he would have been able to share in the dream: therefore, I repeat, the misconception is not of an æsthetic, but of a temperamental, or perhaps habitual, order.

In London, too, in every big capital where the music of Delius comes to a hearing at all, it finds an echo only in the recesses of people's minds where a desire for peace slumbers almost undetected by the individual. Its enjoyment is conditioned by a kind of nostalgic subconsciousness, a dim awareness of the absence of things to which it lends an illusive and transitory reality. Demanding, as it does, introspection above all things from the listener, it gains as few friends as there are introspective people in the world; having gained them, it holds them as fast as only those whose inner depths have been touched can be held.

If there are few such people in America, it is merely because there are few anywhere. Thus, except for superficial circumstances, there is not the slightest reason why Delius should not have his chosen admirers in the United States that he has in England and in Central and Northern Europe. There are even several reasons of an external nature which should amply compensate for the fact that he never courted America by a professional visit and predispose Americans in his favor before they have heard a note of his music. For one thing, the first of such lessons in composition as Delius ever enjoyed, he received after he had become an orange-planter in Florida, whither he had escaped from the commercial discipline imposed on him by his father. During his childhood at Bradford, in Yorkshire, and in his school days at Isleworth near London, he had only studied the violin and heard a good deal of classical music. While settled in the Solano Grove,

on the banks of the St. John's river, he met the organist of the Roman Catholic church at Jacksonville, Thomas F. Ward, and he it was who first initiated the wild-grown genius into the exigencies of musical technique. His first practical experience followed at Danville, Virginia, in 1885, where he had been engaged to teach the two daughters of a professor who, in order to secure him other pupils, had announced his arrival in an advertisement, styling him "Professor Delius, the eminent violinist and composer." Orthodox Leipzig followed as a disillusion upon this free expansion of a naturally gifted musician.

The outcome of his sojourn in the southernmost of the United States was the orchestral Suite, "Florida," an immature piece that has remained unpublished. But this is by no means the only work of his with American associations. In 1888 he wrote a symphonic poem based on "Hiawatha," and his opera, "Koanga," composed 1895–7, had a libretto taken from George Washington Cable's novel, "The Grandissimes." With the Creoles of Louisiana the inhabitants of the Appalachian mountains rubbed shoulders in the catalogue of Delius, for in 1896 they yielded him one of their folk-songs for a set of orchestral variations, the now discarded forerunner of the later choral version of "Appalachia" (1902). Immediately after that composition, in 1903, came "Sea-Drift," a setting of Walt Whitman for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra, which is still regarded by some critics as his finest work, though it is possible to find more potent invention in "A Mass of Life" and "A Song of the High Hills," and a higher flight of poetry in some of the shorter orchestral pieces, such as "Brigg Fair," "In a Summer Garden," or "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring."

It will be worth making a somewhat detailed examination of the most perfect of Delius's compositions for the inspiration of which the world is quite definitely indebted to America. There is no reason why "Sea-Drift" should not be in the repertory of every choral society in the U. S. A. that commands a fair technique and can secure the services of a good-sized orchestra and of a sensitive baritone soloist.

"Sea-Drift" has been thoughtlessly described as vague, rhapsodical, shapeless, and what not. Nothing could be farther from the truth, though there is some excuse for such views if the approach to the work is made, according to the prevalent critical habit, from the angle of formal analysis. What gives this score its exquisite poise is not so much musical structure, as an extraordinary imaginative grasp of the whole poetic implication of the words.

Delius achieves an almost incredible feat of penetration in his treatment of the poem both from within and from without. That is to say, he pierces to the very core of Whitman's meaning while at the same time he paints with the subtlest strokes the outward setting, the grey seascape which makes the soul homesick with its desolate loveliness. He does not proceed in the meticulous manner of the illustrator: it is the mood as a whole which he reproduces, not the particular word-strokes which imperceptibly build up that mood. Thus the heaving bass figure of the opening, which often recurs and also characterizes the close, had better not be interpreted as the surge of waves which first and last accompanies the poet's words; it is rather a symbol for the oppression of the soul by the insoluble riddle of separation following sharply upon companionship—why this day or this moment rather than the next, and why at all?—by the mystery of existence for a measured space, and of extinction or another way of being for the rest of time, and then again the enigma of time itself. "We two together," that is the beginning: "We two together no more," the end. The words, you observe, are almost the same. The music is nearly the same. A bitter little tragedy is enacted upon an impassive background. Two birds nest together and sing, exulting in their union, not knowing that any other state is possible, until one day the he-bird waits in vain for his mate and finds with heartsick astonishment that it is to be alone.

Delius does not dramatize the situation; he does not divide his score into two acts, one glad and one sad. That would have been a crude procedure, showing no more wisdom than the bird's. For the composer knows, as the poet knew, that the tragedy was as real before it happened, because of the certainty that it must happen. It was only the birds' ignorance that left them blithe, unmixed happiness while it lasted. The expectancy of separation is as sorrowful as the state of separation itself, except for a merciful respite of time. But what is time to one who contemplates the sea? The relics of the past washed ashore in the everlasting round of the tides will be a few sticks to-day: to-morrow or next day it will be the body of the she-bird. It is all one to the sea and the universe; the only creature to whom it makes a world of difference will himself drift there soon, and it will be all one again.

Delius rightly assumes this superhuman, or rather superavian, standpoint of indifference. He does so not because he is unconcerned with the birds' fate, but because he is prepared for it through foreknowledge. Hence there is no perceptible intensifying of sympathy after the catastrophe. It is at this more

apparent than real turning-point especially that Delius shows his profound understanding of the poem. A smaller composer would have revelled in the opportunities of the little bird drama and left the great theme of the universal tragedy untouched. He would have thought himself greatly compassionate in pouring out his heart in tremolos and diminished sevenths, in fretful crescendos and dark melodies flaunted like widow's weeds. Delius can afford to remain serene because he has no need of woe's outward trappings to make the hearer ache with the consciousness of the eternal sameness of things.

There is thus, if one like to call it so, a certain monotony throughout his music to "Sea-Drift." The whole is steeped in one mood, for Whitman will have only one mood. Once again we must be prepared for twenty minutes or so of music that will disappoint those who come hastily into a concert-room to snatch a sensation.

It would be hard to think of an artist more disdainful than Delius of easily won popular approval. He will never give you contrast for effect's sake or splash about with color to arrest forcibly a grudging attention. But it is not only that he shrinks from anything that is in the least meretricious: he is clearly unable to write otherwise than he feels. His are all the advantages of a strong and sincere personality in which the dealings with the world all too easily turn into practical disadvantages. The artist who speaks his mind is liable to be misunderstood, and Delius is quite prepared to face that fact. He has a singularly warm welcome for those who seek him out, but he will not try to captivate those who refuse to make the effort. Consider what happened in France. In 1899 he wrote an orchestral work, "Paris: the Song of a Great City," which was full of poetry and beauty and sympathetic insight; but the French capital never hears a performance of a piece of which it might so justifiably be vain: it prefers the crude and dubious compliments of Charpentier.

The temptation to discuss other compositions by Delius is strong, and it is perhaps foolish to refrain merely in order to avoid irrelevance to the title of this essay. After all, every work that shows this composer at his best, or at any rate exhibits his characteristic qualities in a satisfying measure, concerns America, just as it should concern any other civilized nation. Still, I have set myself bounds which had better be adhered to. Perhaps, at the risk of being ridiculous, I could try to stir up some sort of patriotic interest in "Brigg Fair" on the plea that the tune on which this exquisite set of free variations is built up is an old

folk-song of Lincolnshire which may quite conceivably still linger on in some remote Kentucky village. But it seems incredible that this work, at least, and some of the other smaller orchestral pieces, should be so entirely unknown in the U. S. A. as we in England have been led to believe. Neither should it be necessary to point out the exceptional qualities of chamber music such as the two violin Sonatas, the violoncello Sonata and the second String-Quartet, since works of that species are more easily transported by travelling artists than orchestral and choral compositions are made familiar to settled organizations. I shall probably be justified, on the other hand, in referring once more to "Appalachia," of which Mr. Philip Heseltine, in his admirable book on Delius, says:—"Here the deep impression made on Delius by his life in Florida, which colors many of his early works, finds its mature utterance." Need more be said to attract the attention of American conductors? If so, let it be told that the work is based on an old negro folk-song no doubt well known in some, at least, of the United States:—"Oh Honey, I am going down the river in the morning." Above all, it must be said with all due emphasis that "Appalachia" is a work of her share in which America may well be proud.[1]

Concerning the "Mass of Life," a setting for solo voices, chorus and orchestra of portions of Nietzsche's "Also sprach Zarathustra," I can find no excuse for saying anything here, except that it is Delius's most considerable concert work which, though not on a level throughout, and therefore less completely convincing than "Sea-Drift," contains some of his biggest and most inspired music. And his two mature Operas[2] will have to take their chance in America as they do elsewhere—and it is a very poor chance. They are unfortunately regarded as undramatic, which no doubt they are if one measures them by conventional operatic standards instead of appraising their own peculiar and quite exceptional merits. But they bring me to another and very interesting aspect of my subject.

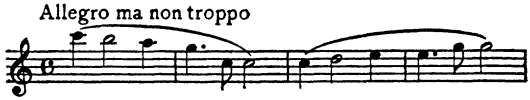
A link between the U. S. A. and Delius, and one that should be most gratifying to Americans, is a certain affinity with MacDowell which his music in some of its phases undoubtedly shows, though I am not aware that it has ever been pointed out by

[1]There are two versions: the original one for orchestra with choral refrains, and another arranged for purely orchestral performance.

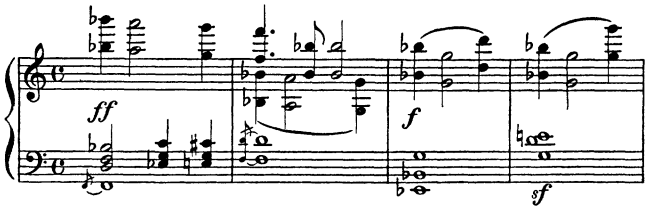
[2]"A Village Romeo and Juliet," based on Gottfried Keller's story, "Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe;" "Fennimore and Gerda," founded on Jens Peter Jacobsen's novel, "Niels Lyhne" ("Siren Voices," in English). Both works are fully dealt with in Philip Heseltine's "Frederick Delius" (John Lane), and a study of the latter is in my "Stepchildren of Music" (Lincoln MacVeagh, The Dial Press).

any critic. That it amounts to much could not be asserted, but then, Delius reveals hardly any other composer's influence whatsoever, which again may be due to his seclusion in Florida during his most impressionable years. It has often been remarked that he can be fitted into no school and traced to no master. Grieg is the one creative musician to whom he has sometimes been compared, but even there the likeness is confined to generalities of taste and outlook rather than attributable to specifically musical procedures. Now Grieg and MacDowell are in many ways parallel figures: what the one is to Norway, the other is to America, and in the matter of magnitude they are very much of a piece. It would, therefore, not unnaturally follow that Delius, being in a measure like Grieg, cannot be very unlike MacDowell; but I would boldly go so far as to assert that the actual musical resemblance to the latter is a good deal stronger. To deal with divergences first, however, MacDowell's virtuoso strain is totally absent in Delius and the American excels the Englishman in form; on the other hand, the latter soars higher in a pure lyricism charged with emotion as distinct from sentiment and, less of a musician as such, he is the more fastidious artist of the two. One knows that MacDowell, during his student days in Paris, very nearly turned from music to painting, yet one thinks of him as a cunning craftsman at his own professional game, while with Delius one is never quite free from the impression that he might just as easily have turned into a painter, a sculptor or a poet as into a composer. Not into an actor, however, as MacDowell, who was also a reproductive artist, might conceivably have done. Delius is only creative. His music is pure art, divested, it is true, of some musical elements that make for stability, for coherence, but clear of the dross of empty professionalism.

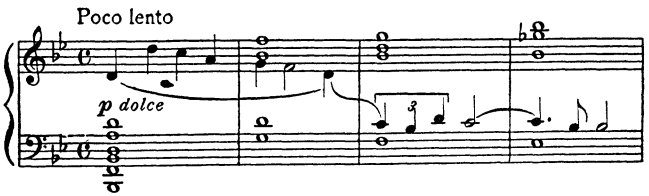
I could go on enumerating differences between MacDowell and Delius, but the points at which they converge are more interesting for the moment. They are perhaps most clearly noticeable in the latter's opera, "A Village Romeo and Juliet," the whole of which is suffused with what I would call the pathetic lyricism, a note that may almost be said to have the poignancy of an echo of some of MacDowell's smaller and not consciously pianistic keyboard pieces. To begin with, the mannerism of a syncopated melodic line of this pattern:—



(the opening theme of Delius's opera) will sound surprisingly familiar to American musicians who know and love their pre-eminent composer. But what will they say to this harmonized continuation of it?



This is pure MacDowell, though moved perhaps a decade or so nearer our own time. Space will not permit of much quotation, but one most astonishing coincidence—for no doubt it is that—must be shown in a fragment from the introduction to the fourth scene, the agonizingly sad incident of the rustic Juliet's last night in the ruined homestead:—



Is there any need to point out, even after giving nothing more than a specimen of four bars, that this music matches in atmosphere and in the degree and kind of emotion expressed the "Deserted Farm" of MacDowell? Here is an instance of similar literary suggestions evoking similar thoughts in two different musical minds that might well lead to some fascinating speculations.

I have already hinted at a certain habit of dispensing with technique *qua* technique on the part of Delius. This is, of course, what has struck my unnamed colleague of Philadelphia when he complains of a lack of form in the violoncello Concerto. He is perfectly right in his diagnosis: the work really is deficient in form; what one is moved to object to is merely his subsequent judgment that the defect he has discovered is necessarily fatal to the Concerto's appeal to the hearer. It depends, surely, on the nature of the audience whether there can be a question of fatality or whether the case is merely dangerous or even innocuous. One is reminded of a certain Scottish member of Parliament at the time just before the first railway was opened in Britain. When this ardent advocate of the new invention was challenged by the

anxious inquiry what would happen to the train if a cow should get in its way, he replied laconically: "Weel, I should be sorra for the coo!" Before a composer of the power of a Delius engaged in clearing a new track for himself, an audience anywhere in the world is apt to find itself in the position of the placid and unsuspecting ruminant.

No doubt the music of Delius has its faults, both of commission and omission—whose has not? It is too exclusively harmonic, too restless and fluid in its continual shifting of the key-centre; melodic invention is poorly developed in the composer, who often gives us vague thematic shapes where we look for strong outlines. Against these defects we have to set the ineffable loveliness of his poetry, an individual flavor that is to be found nowhere else in music and without which music would be vastly the poorer, artistry as sensitive as Debussy's, contrivance as distinctive as that of Strauss or Elgar or Sibelius at their best, and an inspiration more consistently on a high level than that of any of these. But it is difficult to establish comparisons between his work and that of any other creative musician, for, as I have already maintained, one thinks of it as art first and as music only afterwards. Poets like Paul Verlaine and Ernest Dowson, painters like Gauguin (the composer's friend in his Paris days), and Claude Monet, come to mind at various times during a hearing of this or that work.

To be aware of Delius's fault is not to depreciate him. The ideal lover, it must be remembered, is not the one who sees in the beloved the perfection he ought to know to be unattainable, but the one who is aware of human deficiencies and worships in spite of them; perhaps, in a measure, because of them. All that one asks is that Delius should not be reproached for the absence of conventions to which he never intended to conform. It is true that his music lacks shape, but it is equally true that it is ideally free from a formality to which the composer happens to be temperamentally and very deliberately opposed.

Frederick Delius must be expected to mean as little to the majority of Americans as he means to the crowd anywhere, and no especial blame attaches to the U. S. A. for giving him their share of the disfavor and incomprehension to which he has long been used, and resigned. But there is no valid reason why more frequent performances of his best works should not gain him as fervent a band of chosen admirers there as he has grouped round himself in several European countries. And the fact that he is already externally linked to America, in more ways than one, should make the experiment on a large scale the more worth trying.