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THE EARLY HISTORY OF 'KOANGA'

Robert Threlfall

KOANGA was the third of Frederick Delius's operas to be completed (in 1897), but the first to be staged (in 1904); it was also the first of his earlier works to achieve the distinction of posthumous publication (in 1935). The long-awaited release of the recent recording,¹ by turning our thoughts anew to this colourful score, provides a suitable occasion to review the earlier history of the work.

Although the first stage performance took place in Elberfeld under Fritz Cassirer on 30 March 1904, generous selections had already been played in concert form during the famous all-Delius programme given at the St. James's Hall, London, under Alfred Hertz on 30 May 1899. It appears that the second half of the lengthy evening was devoted to the following excerpts from *Koanga*:

Prelude to Act III
Quintet and Finale of Act I
Act II (complete)

Copies of the programme-book seemed to have vanished: according to Eric Fenby, Delius himself did not retain any, and neither the Delius Trust files nor any other of the usual research channels could provide one. In 1972, however, an all-but-unique copy was loaned to Dr. Lionel Carley, the Trust's present Archivist, by an American admirer of Delius. Of considerable interest for more than one reason, this document is particularly illuminating with regard to the earliest form of *Koanga*, for it contains Keary's complete libretto for Act II in its original unrevised form.

It seems (from a letter of 21 April 1904 written to Delius by Otto Mertens of the Stadttheater, Elberfeld) that some 500 copies of Jelka Delius's translation of the libretto from English into German—its *second* version—were printed at the time of the first stage performance; but again, no copy has yet been found. However, the final state of the original autograph full score clearly establishes the text which was then performed and sung (the German translation was added to

¹ HMV SLS 974

this manuscript, presumably, at this time). Among the alterations which were then incorporated—distinguished by the different styles of paper concerned—are the following:

Act I. Four pages, the first headed 'Einlage zum I. Akt,' and containing the orchestral introduction, precede the 73 numbered pages of this act. (The original page 17 appears to be missing.)

Act II. After p. 31¹ a sheet marked 'I. Einlage im II. Akt' introduces a 14-page interpolation. After p. 66 comes a 3-page 'II. Einlage im 2. Akt'. The last page of the act is numbered 86. (The original pages 24-29 are missing.)

Act III. A new orchestral introduction (in fact derived from Delius's previous opera, *The Magic Fountain*) was written on sheets paginated 1-7; the original pages 1-10 are crossed through but not removed. (The original pages 44-5 are missing, and a deleted page follows p. 58; the last page of this act is numbered 166.)

In his searching pioneer study² William Randel rightly drew attention to the 'conspicuous changes made in the score' around the time of the first stage performance by 'deletion of every reference to the De Grapion family . . . late in the rehearsal period'. These alterations account for many of the above changes, especially those in Act II. The larger Act II insertion is Palmyra's aria; by giving the temperamental creator of the heroine's role a central solo, it doubtless helped to reconcile her to her costume and reduce the likelihood of her threatened throat infection affecting the performance. Another result of these changes was to alter completely Palmyra's part in Koanga's betrayal: whereas in the later (and the current) version she is abducted by Perez and the servants after the 'Calinda', in the original version she was persuaded to become the accomplice in Koanga's downfall, slipping away while he was drinking.

During the preparations for the revival which finally materialized at Covent Garden under Sir Thomas Beecham on 23 September 1935, the original English libretto was subjected to considerable further revision. Before that, however, a typescript had been prepared. This document, which survives in the archives of the publishers, Messrs. Boosey & Hawkes, carries the unequivocal attribution 'words by C. F. Keary'. But into the gaps left where the alterations had been made for the 1904 performance, Jelka Delius inserted a rough longhand translation of the passages in question, which had not previously been available in English. Thus, not only were the 1904 deletions and additions in Act II maintained, but Jelka 'put a litteral [sic] translation on top'³ of the original 1904 German for Palmyra's aria.

Although the title-pages of the material issued at the time of the 1935 performance acknowledge Beecham and Edward Agate as revisers of Keary's libretto, it should be emphasized that the music itself and its scoring remained unchanged as Delius had left it after 1904. Beecham interpolated the recently-dictated *Irmelin Prelude* as additional transformation music at cue no. 20 in Act III; but this was later issued separately and did not appear in the 1935 vocal score by Eric Fenby, which was the first publication. The libretto, in its 1935 (i.e. *third*) version, was also separately published at the same time¹. Understandably, it is

¹ The original pagination commenced at 1 in each act.

² 'Koanga and its libretto' (*Music & Letters*, April 1971)

³ Jelka's own pencilled comment on Eric Fenby's copy full score, (b) below.

on these publications only that most commentators have based their strictures—including William Randel whose criticism of the text apportioned most of his blame to Keary, the acknowledged original librettist, despite other hands' subsequent retouchings. (All his quotations are from this third version.)

For the revival during the Camden Festival at Sadlers Wells, London, under Sir Charles Groves in May 1972, and in particular for the subsequent recording in 1973, the whole libretto was reviewed; ultimately it was given a 'new look' by Douglas Craig and Andrew Page, following a careful reappraisal of the sources. After final revisions, this latest and *fourth* version is included in the new recording and in the reprint of the 1935 vocal score (due for publication by Boosey & Hawkes during 1974), which also incorporates numerous corrections to the musical text.

* * *

The manuscript sources of the music of *Koanga* are as follows:

FULL SCORES

(a) Delius's autograph MS. full score, with original English text, and German translation interlined or patched over; the whole modified as described above. At present this is in the possession of Jacksonville University, Florida, U.S.A., and a microfilm is retained by the Delius Trust.

(b) Eric Fenby's MS. copy of the full score; at first reconstructed from the parts (the autograph full score having been mislaid) but in the later stages copied from the rediscovered autograph. The text of this score, in English only, principally agrees with that of the published 1935 edition of the libretto. Xerox copies of this score, incorporating the latest libretto, are available on hire.

VOCAL SCORES

(a) Arranged by Florent Schmitt, with the piano part in his autograph. Delius's own hand is in evidence as regards the voice parts and words of Act I, and he has also added the insertions in Act II. The words are in English and German in Acts I - II, German only in Act III. This MS. is in the Boosey & Hawkes archives.

(b) A copy of the above in a copyist's hand, with the alterations in Act II also in Delius's hand, and with English and German words, is in the archive of the Delius Trust (Vol. 46).

(c) Another copy of the above, by two or more different copyists, inter-leaved for the use of the producer at Elberfeld in 1904, and with German words only, is in the Boosey & Hawkes archives.

(d) Arranged by Eric Fenby, and in his autograph; but the words partly in another hand. This version differs from Schmitt's original vocal score, and formed the basis of the published edition of 1935.

A recent check over the orchestral materials of *Koanga* in the Boosey & Hawkes orchestral hire library revealed several further features of interest. The parts, of course, are all in manuscript, and the many blue-pencillings and comments bear silent witness to the various performances for which they have been used. On inspection, it was immediately apparent that a considerable amount of this material was in a hand very familiar to the Delius Trust archivists: that of the copyist responsible for several Delius scores of the late 1890's (e.g. piano

¹ By Winthrop Rogers Edition (Boosey & Hawkes Ltd.)

solo part of the *Fantasy* for Orchestra and Pianoforte, 1897; *Over the hills and far away*, second manuscript, 1897; an early vocal score of *Koanga*, (b) above; various songs of the same period, etc.) On closer inspection, it became equally evident that it was this copyist who was responsible for those portions performed at the 1899 concert, conspicuous now by the distinctive colour and larger size of the paper, and in many cases also by their separate titles 'Prelude', 'Quintett', 'Act 2'. Undoubtedly, then, the original MS. parts for those excerpts played in 1899 still circulate in the current orchestral material! In the Act II excerpt the additions of 1904 were clearly inserted in that year, on separate sheets of smaller paper, in different hands.

Even more interesting is the discovery that the early parts separately entitled 'Prelude' (Act III) are in fact not of the original prelude to this act as it appeared in the full score and earliest vocal scores, but of the Prelude to Act II of Delius's previous opera, *The Magic Fountain*. It was well-known that this substitution had occurred at some stage—Beecham referred to it in his book (p. 99)—but it is not generally realized that the exchange occurred as early as that first-ever concert performance. Whatever the reason for this harmless deception, there is no doubt that the substituted movement, with its tonality progressing from C to G flat, would form a better concert introduction to the Quintet and Finale of Act I. Possibly purely musical considerations dictated the transfer, then, and the composer perhaps preferred not to acknowledge this early example of self-borrowing to his first London audience. The orchestral material for the remainder of Act I and for all of Act III was copied later for the 1904 performances; and, presumably because it was extracted from the original manuscript full score, this portion includes the original version of the Act III prelude—which, however, is again deleted in blue pencil.

Far from exhausting the musical, let alone the literary, details of the changes *Koanga* has undergone during the years, this note merely seeks to establish some of the salient characteristics of the various libretti, scores and current orchestral material. Even Beecham considered the score of *Koanga* to be in some ways not so characteristic as its operatic predecessors, and viewed the Voodoo scenes with rather less than gravity. William Randel sympathized with the original *Koanga* and considered a leopard-skin 'a preposterous costume for Louisiana' (though surely it is apt for the magic incantations, the only occasion on which it is donned). All have joined in criticizing the at times unfortunate Delius-Keary-Jelka-Agate-Beecham compilation of the text, even though it is based on one of G. W. Cable's most movingly-told episodes from 'The Grandissimes'. But after all, the composer readily acknowledged that 'my literature is not on a level with my music' (Delius to Mrs. Bell-Ranske, 25 February 1896); and it is the music that counts. Let us hope that the new libretto and new recording will now ensure a welcome for this unusual work from those who are accustomed to base their judgment on the evidence of their own ears—not on the verdicts of earlier writers, who have often dismissed the score as an immature effort. We at least possess one advantage over Delius himself—he was never to achieve, in the case of *Koanga*, the ambition he expressed to Ernest Newman (in a letter of 4 February 1908): 'I must say I should like to hear my own musical dramatic works performed in the language they were written in before I disappear.'

Thanks for willingly making original material available for the purpose of this short study are extended to Messrs. Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers Limited and to the Trustees of the Delius Estate.