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'KOANGA' AND ITS LIBRETTO

BY WILLIAM RANDEL

FREDERICK DELIUS arrived in the United States in 1884, four years after 'The Grandissimes' was issued as a book, following its serial run in *Scribner's Monthly*. But if he read this novel by George W. Cable during the more than two years he spent in America, it did not at once suggest an opera. Not until about 1890, indeed, did he even think of operatic composition; and in his first two attempts, 'Irmelin' and 'The Magic Fountain', he followed Wagner's practice of devising his own story. After roughing out a libretto for 'The Magic Fountain',¹ however, he became conscious of his weakness with words and decided that he needed help.

Finding a librettist was not easy. Most of the people Delius knew in Paris, where he had settled in 1888 after eighteen months of study in Leipzig, were artists and musicians. The only writers in the group that patronized La Mère Charlotte's *crémérie*, his social base in the Rue de la Grande Chaumière, were a minor French poet named Leclerc, whom he disliked, and August Strindberg, whom he liked well enough but who was in no condition, just then, for creative effort. A Dr. Encausse, better known by his pen-name 'Papus', had recently written, in collaboration with Delius, a remarkable pamphlet, 'Anatomie et physiologie de l'orchestre' (1894); but his narrow preoccupation with the occult precluded collaboration on an opera. Delius had also made the acquaintance of several interesting women in the moneyed international set, but they were better at intrigue than at serious intellectual effort. One friend who had always listened to his plans and projects was Jutta Bell, who, as his closest neighbour at Solano Grove in Florida, had encouraged his dream of becoming a composer. Because she was now living in England he had to broach the subject of a libretto by means of letters, whose survival eases the reconstruction of events. Jutta proved quite willing to help; but her own professional ambition, as a teacher of elocution, cut short the collaboration, with regrettable results.

The letters from Delius to Jutta, from 1894 to 1899,² reveal more about his creative process, and his attitude toward women, than he may have wished to commit to posterity. He opened his campaign for Jutta's cooperation by calling her a sister nature to his own,

¹ 'The Magic Fountain' was never published: the manuscript is owned by the Delius Trust. 'Irmelin' was first presented at Oxford in 1953, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, who had been the leading champion of Delius's works since 1908.

² Photocopies of the original letters are in the Delius Collection of the Haydon Burns Library in Jacksonville, Florida.

with the ability to help him say something of importance to the world. He wanted to tread in Wagner's footsteps, he confided, and even to go beyond Wagner.³ Then, when she had agreed to help with the libretto for 'The Magic Fountain', he sketched out for her the final scene as he had conceived it: the Spanish hero, Solano, insists on drinking from the spring despite the frantic warning of his Indian beloved, Watawa, that its water is lethal. To prove her love she drinks, and dies; Solano, overwhelmed by grief, drinks in turn and dies beside her.⁴

In another letter Delius outlined a possible triad of related operas: one on Indians ('The Magic Fountain'), one on gypsies, and one on negroes and quadroons. By February 1896 he had set the first aside and was well started on the third, based on the Bras-Coupé story in Cable's 'The Grandissimes'.⁵ He asked Jutta to read the novel and send him her opinion of it. He hoped to be able to keep the music close to the negro idiom, he wrote, and to capture as much as possible of the Southern atmosphere; but he felt he would have to change the ending. Both the principals, Koanga and Palmyra (the names he used for Cable's Bras-Coupé and Palmyre), must die or commit suicide⁶—the tried and true Wagnerian formula. Hearing 'Tannhäuser' at Bayreuth in the summer of 1894, and 'Parsifal' twice,⁷ must have reaffirmed his devotion to Wagner. Jutta, with a will almost as strong as his own, might have dissuaded Delius from abjuring the psychological realism of Cable's story for the fantasy he said he preferred and the stock Wagnerian conclusion he considered essential. But she declined this second chance to help, explaining that she was about to open a school of elocution in Stanhope Gardens.⁸ She must have seen little point, moreover, in spending time and energy on so uncertain a project as another opera when the one she had helped with had not been produced.

In the spring of 1896 Delius met Charles Francis Keary (1848–1917), a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and an established author. His third novel, 'Herbert Vanlennert', had just been published; 'The Outlines of Primitive Belief' (1882) gave him standing as an authority on myth; his 'Norway and the Norwegians' (1892) expressed a deep love for that country that Delius could share; and 'A Wanderer', first published in 1888 and reissued in 1895, had a subtle romanticism that must have been irresistible to Delius. Some

³ Delius to Jutta Bell, 29 May 1894.

⁴ 11 July 1894.

⁵ 6 February 1896.

⁶ 25 February 1896.

⁷ 29 July, 12 August 1894.

⁸ Jutta, after studying with Mme. Marchesi in Paris, adopted as her professional name Mme. Bell-Ranske. In 1902 she published a textbook, 'Health, Speech and Song: A Practical Guide to Voice-Projection', and late that year she returned to Florida, opening a studio in Jacksonville, lecturing on voice-control, and directing cantatas. During the year 1917–18 she was in New York, giving a very successful series of dramatic readings, on Thursday evenings, at Cooper Union and taking an active part in the formation of a People's Art League.

reviewers had been critical, charging Keary with writing too fast, inadequate revising, and never rising above the commonplace. If these judgments were valid, we have one reason for the gross weakness of the 'Koanga' libretto. A second and more substantial reason is that Keary was unfamiliar with American literature and negro speech. A third reason, overarching the other two, is conjectural: that Delius was so impressed by the list of Keary's books that he accepted without question his radical modifications of Cable's language. Keary was out of his element, but neither he nor Delius seemed aware of the fact.

The plot of 'Koanga' is based on the Bras-Coupé story in chaps. 29 and 30 of 'The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life'.⁹ The time is the late eighteenth century. Agricola Fusilier, general manager of the Grandissime estate, buys the entire cargo of a newly arrived slave ship at a New Orleans quay, but resells the most conspicuous slave, a six-foot-five giant, to the overseer of Don José Martinez. When asked his name, the slave mumbles it first in the Jalloff tongue and then condescends to give the Congolese equivalent, Mioko-Koanga, which is recognized as meaning, in French *bras-coupé*. He is not maimed, however; the name symbolizes the loss to his tribe, by his capture, of its strong right arm. His new Spanish owner has trouble, however, for Bras-Coupé, when told to work, expresses his outrage at such an indignity by injuring several slaves standing near, one of whom subsequently dies, and then tries to run away but is downed by a bullet from the overseer's pistol. As a Jalloff prince, the knowledgeable overseer explains, Bras-Coupé will surely die if forced to work. Palmyre, the personal slave of 'Mademoiselle' (Honoré Grandissime's sister and Don José's intended bride), is persuaded to talk him into submission, succeeding because the giant falls in love with her and, at the same time, worships 'Mademoiselle'. Agricola takes the further step of promising that Bras-Coupé may marry Palmyre, to the latter's deep distress. This elaborate scheming wins Bras-Coupé over, and he is almost at once Don José's most valuable slave.

On the night set for the double wedding—Don José and 'Mademoiselle' in the hall of the Grandissime mansion, Bras-Coupé and a very reluctant Palmyre on the rear veranda—Bras-Coupé tastes alcohol for the first time in his life and becomes roaring drunk. When the other slaves refuse him an eleventh cup of wine, he staggers into the midst of the white revellers, demands a drink of Don José, and, when the latter raises a hand against him, flattens him with a savage blow and utters Voodoo maledictions over his prostrate body. Having thus forfeited his life under the eighteenth-century *Code Noir*, he flees to the swamps. It should be noted that Cable, in writing

⁹ After serial publication in *Scribner's Monthly*, xix (November 1879) to xx (October 1880), the book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1880, with many subsequent reissues.

this novel, was indirectly criticizing the rise of white supremacy after emancipation as the white man's means of keeping the freedmen under control; but Delius and Keary would have been unaware of this purpose, or even of the interracial struggle of the period.

Koanga's curse quickly takes effect, and the effect lingers. A fever strikes the slaves, killing some and leaving others gaunt and weak. The superstitious negroes blame the curse. Finally Don José himself is taken sick. Then one afternoon Bras-Coupé appears suddenly and demands his bride. Don José, in the third day of the fever, can do nothing, and his wife seems paralysed. Bras-Coupé utters a terrible curse on the household and is gone. Soon after he is indiscreet enough to join the slave revels in Congo Square; relatives of the slave he had mortally injured point him out to the police, who capture him with a lasso. In spite of pleas for clemency by Palmyre, he is deprived of his ears, flogged and hamstrung. But not even Don José's death can make him lift the curse. Only when 'Mademoiselle', the Don's widow, shows him her baby son, who smiles at the maimed slave and reaches out a hand to touch his cheek, does he relent. The iron will breaks: "The first tears of Bras-Coupé's life, the dying testimony of humanity, gushed from his eyes . . . The curse was lifted". Moments later Bras-Coupé dies, with a vision of returning to his native Africa.¹⁰ This is Cable's story.

Keary, however, may never have read 'The Grandissimes'. He had at hand the rough plot outline that Delius had drafted, and showed no inclination to alter it. Arthur Hutchings, making the reasonable assumption that Keary alone was author of the text, condemns the words as "sometimes fatuous and always crude"—a judgment that must strike most readers of the vocal score or the printed libretto as only slightly exaggerated. Hutchings realized, however, that Delius deserved much of the blame by giving musical accents to which words could not properly be fitted. "It is doubtful", he writes, "if in any other score from a great musician, anything so amusingly fatuous occurs as the work-song of the slaves in *Koanga*".¹¹ Words are not the only flaws, however; Delius leads into this work-song without the skilful transition that he mastered in his later operas, especially in 'Fennimore and Gerda' (1908-10).

The verbal infelicity of 'Koanga' may easily be demonstrated by comparing the two versions, Cable's and Keary's, of the curse that Koanga utters. Cable gives the curse in three sentences separated by bits of conversation and dramatic action: "May this house and all in it who are not women be accursed . . . May its fields not know the plow nor nourish the cattle that overrun it . . . May weeds cover the ground until the air is full of their odor and the wild beasts of the forest come and lie down under their cover".¹² The simple

¹⁰ 'The Grandissimes' (New York, Sagamore Press, 1957), pp. 169-93.

¹¹ Arthur Hutchings, 'Delius: A Critical Biography' (London, 1949), p. 132.

¹² 'The Grandissimes', p. 187.

dignity of these words is appropriate for an African prince and, unaltered, might serve as a magnificent recitative. Keary saw fit to elevate the diction, in a conventional poetic form; the words 'thee' and 'thy' are obvious indicators:

Hear me, god Voodoo:
I have betrayed my trust,
I have forsworn my faith,
False to my fathers, now on thee do I call.
I know thy secret pow'r,
Reject me not, and grant the gift I crave!
Let all my white companions learn what
 magic may perform,
That on their heads descend the worst
 of mortal woes,
The triple curse on land, on air, and
 flood:
From water ling'ring death, starvation on
 the earth and tainted fevers to corrupt
 the air!
Now with this threefold evil visit them,
 and let thy thunder wake applause!¹³

Such heightening, for a crucial moment in the development, is far less objectionable, however, than Keary's 'literary' diction in the ordinary dialogue—for example, this exchange between Palmyra and the overseer:

SIMON PEREZ: In vain to call Koanga; he is a thousand miles away.

PALMYRA: Nay, it is false; a shameless lie!

SIMON PEREZ: And yet, I will not leave your side!

'Tis foolish thus to moan and grieve! Let us be merry, while
we may! You and I, Palmyra sweet!

PALMYRA: Oh coward! To face him you would never dare!¹⁴

As sung, the verbal banality and artificiality would admittedly be less noticeable than a reading makes evident, but the result is in any event far from the Louisiana speech as Cable observed it on the spot and equally far from the effect that he intended in his story.

In Sir Thomas Beecham's opinion 'Koanga' is "in more ways than one a less truly Delian work than its predecessors 'Irmelin' and 'The Magic Fountain'". The "mystical factor so beloved by Frederick", Beecham continued, is present in the use of Voodoo, "but its demonstrations are just as likely to provoke risibility as to rouse terror".¹⁵ A text closer to Cable's original, linguistically more realistic, would have served to strengthen the sense of foreboding and impending doom.

The divergence of the 'Koanga' text from the Cable story is not

¹³ 'Koanga', complete libretto (London, Boosey & Hawkes, n. d.), p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Sir Thomas Beecham, 'Frederick Delius' (London, 1959), p. 130.

limited to the diction; the alteration of the basic plot is more serious. Without having all the evidence at hand, one might suppose that Delius took the plot not from 'The Grandissimes' but from some other version of the Bras-Coupé story. The theme of an African king or prince included in a slave-trader's cargo and suffering with particular intensity under the American slave system is familiar in the general American mythology; in poetry Longfellow used the theme in 'The Slave's Dream', and Bryant in 'The African Chief'. The form of the legend specifically calling the prince by the name of Bras-Coupé was apparently familiar, over many years, in Louisiana. Louis Moreau Gottschalk, a Creole musician, recorded in 1857 a version he had heard from old negroes in his native New Orleans:

One of my favourite stories was that of John bras-Coupé, captain of the runaway slaves of bayou Sarah, who filled the whole of Louisiana with the reports of his sanguinary exploits. He resisted alone, this hero of our savannas, all the expeditions sent in pursuit of him.

Among the strange rumours about him was one that his chest repelled bullets:

The Negroes asserted that his look fascinated, and that he fed on human flesh. He was finally captured, and condemned to be hung in the 'square' opposite the Spanish cathedral. He had been attacked by a terrible scurvy, and the infecting odours exhaled by his corpse after his execution made them bury him, contrary to the law that condemned him to remain suspended to the gallows for ten days.¹⁶

Lafcadio Hearn, within months of the publication of 'The Grandissimes', wrote for the New Orleans *Item* an article entitled 'The Original Bras-Coupé'.¹⁷ He praised Cable for achieving a superb artistic effect by making "Bras-Coupé great, valiant, large-hearted;—a savage prince fighting against the whole force of a civilized community". But he insisted that the real story, as told to him by Alexander Dimitry "in a quaint bookstore in Exchange Alley", was quite different, and on a much lower level. A slave named Squire, in this version, was owned by a New Orleans auctioneer who assigned him only very light work. But the auctioneer sold him to the owner of a cotton press who made him work much harder. In a quarrel Squire struck his overseer, who smashed his arm with an iron bar, so badly that it had to be amputated. Squire fled to the woods, where a Spaniard befriended him. For two years Squire waylaid travellers and became known and feared as Bras-Coupé. When the City Council offered a reward of \$2,000 for him dead or

¹⁶ Louis Moreau Gottschalk, 'Notes of a Pianist', ed. Clare Gottschalk, trans. Robert E. Peterson, M.D. (London, 1881), p. 105.

¹⁷ Issue of 27 October 1880, collected in Hearn, 'Essays on American Literature' (Tokyo, 1929), pp. 58–61.

alive, the Spaniard crushed his head while he slept and took his body to the city, where it was placed under the arcade in Jackson Square. The gawking crowd realized that the legendary Bras-Coupé was only poor old Squire.

Even with its alterations 'Koanga' is clearly much closer to the Cable version than to any of the other existing versions in Louisiana. Delius's opera has a prologue, three acts (with the third divided into two scenes) and an epilogue: it is obviously a full evening's entertainment. As in Wagner, long passages of music without action or singing weave the fabric of mood and atmosphere. There is no overture, but the prologue is an extended musical introduction before a single word is uttered. The epilogue lasts for nine minutes and has voices—those of the girls who have listened to the story supposedly told by Uncle Joe—for only two of the nine. From one point of view, this is pure gain, for the music of 'Koanga' is aesthetically satisfying and, if not at the summit of Delian excellence, not much below it. But opera cannot, unfortunately, be judged apart from the words and the story. These may hold a somewhat inferior place in any opera, but Cable's story is so good that the modification of the diction and plot by Delius and Keary is greatly to be regretted.

The prologue is reasonably close to Cable's contrivance for telling the story: a group of girls, assembled at a family festivity, ask that an old story be retold; its annual retelling, it is clear, has become a tradition. And the epilogue is merely a return to the present, just as Cable gives it in the first lines of the next chapter in the novel: "The fair Grandissimes all agreed, at the close, that it was pitiful", although they further agreed, children of the slave aristocracy that they were, that Bras-Coupé "had deserved his fate". In the opera proper, within the three acts of 'Koanga', the literary purist has good reason to complain: the tampering approaches literary mayhem. The overseer, whom Cable presents as the wisest and most level-headed of all the characters, becomes the villain, Simon Perez, pressing his attentions upon Palmyra, who has no use for him whatever. Don José is already married in the Delius-Keary version; for the wedding of Koanga and a willing Palmyra he sets the date, not of his own wedding as in Cable, but of his next birthday. During the revels prior to the ceremony Perez drags Palmyra away; he is in league with Don José's wife to prevent the marriage. Koanga demands of Don José that he restore his wife-to-be. In the ensuing argument Koanga strikes his master, utters a terrible curse, and then, to the accompaniment of flashes of lightening, hastens to the dense forest.

In the first part of Act III Koanga, surrounded by followers in a marsh hideout, conducts a Voodoo ceremony in the course of which he slashes both his arms; a priest, Rangwan, catches the blood and uses it in an ancient rite. This scene dissolves into the second, at the plantation, where the slaves are shown in a condition of extreme

distress. Don José dismisses their talk of Voodoo as "heathen chatter" and promises dire vengeance on Koanga if and when he is caught; the slaves entreat him instead to make peace with Koanga. Simon Perez, alert for opportunities to woo the heartsick Palmyra, seizes her in his arms. Koanga appears unexpectedly, makes short work of the villain, but within minutes is himself taken prisoner. The vengeful whites scourge him to death, although he has time for a dying solo. Palmyra utters her own despairing outburst: "Alas, Koanga, dead! Dead, my hero consort", and then stabs herself.

The *Liebstock* concluding 'Tristan und Isolde' is the obvious model. This is one kind of romanticism, the Wagnerian kind, more appealing to Delius than the variety in 'The Grandissimes'. Apart from the commitment to the Wagnerian formula, Delius had two technical reasons for rejecting Cable's ending. It had a degree of complexity that might have left the audience somewhat confused, and it hardly fitted the Koanga-Palmyra relationship that he had developed from the first act onward. Considered by itself, the Cable ending would have been easy to stage; abandoning it for the Wagnerian ending may be the best example of Delius's insensitivity to literary subtlety, an insensitivity in sharp contrast to the developing musical subtleties amply apparent in 'Koanga'.

A third element in opera is choreography. Here a composer has a considerable advantage over a writer, for he can request and, given normal cooperation, can secure a three-dimensional actuality that eludes the printed page. Cable could describe a dance; Delius, through his producer and conductor, could stage the dance—assuming always, that the opera would be performed. Cable does very well within his medium:

It was on a Sabbath afternoon that a band of Choctaws having just played a game of racquette behind the city and a similar game being about to end between the white champions of two rival faubourgs, the beating of tom-toms, rattling of mules' jawbones and sounding of wooden horns drew the populace across the fields to a spot whose present name of Congo Square still preserves a reminder of its old barbaric pastimes. On a grassy plain under the ramparts, the performers of those hideous discords sat upon the ground facing each other, and in their midst the dancers danced. They gyrated in couples, a few at a time, throwing their bodies into the most startling attitudes and the wildest contortions, while the whole company of black lookers-on, incited by the tones of the weird music and the violent posturing of the dancers, swayed and writhed in time with the bones and drums, and at frequent intervals lifting, in that wild African unison no more to be described than forgotten, the unutterable songs of the Babouille and Counjaille dances, with their ejaculatory burdens of "Aie! Aie! Voudou Magnan!" and "Aie Calinda! Dancé Calinda!" The volume of sound rose and fell with the augmentation or diminution of the dancers' extravagances. Now a fresh young man, young and supple, bounding into the ring, revived the flagging rattlers, drummers and trumpeters; now a wearied dancer, finding his strength going,



La prémier' fois me té 'oir li,
 Le té posé au bord so lit;
 Mo di', Bouzon, bel n'amourèse!
 L'aut' fois le té 's' so la saise
 Comme viê Madam dans so fauteil,
 Quand le vivé côté soleil.
 So giés yé té plis noir passe la nouitte,
 So dé la lev' plis doux passe la quitte!
 Tou' mo la vie, Zamein mo oir
 Ein n'amourèse zoli comme ca!
 Mo' blié manzé—mo' blié boir'—
 Mo' blié tout dipi ç' temps-là—
 Mo' blié parlé—mo' blié dormi,
 Quand mo pensé après zami!

The singer, one Raoul, is next urged to “sing that song the negroes sing when they go out in the bayous at night, stealing pigs and chickens!” He obliges, but this time Cable gives only the words:

Dé zabs, dé zabs, dé counou ouaïe ouaïe,
 Dé zabs, dé zabs, dé counou ouaïe ouaïe,
 Counou ouaïe ouaïe ouaïe ouaïe,
 Counou ouaïe ouaïe ouaïe ouaïe,
 Momza, momza, momza, momza,
 Roza, Roza, roza-et-momza.

In the book as published Cable transfers the music, which is very lively, to the second set of words, and the reader realizes that the music fits both sets equally well.

As a further complication, Delius took this Creole tune as written down by Cable, modified it only slightly, and provided a third set of words, more suitable, he no doubt thought, to his opening scene:²⁴

Leggiero

Work, nig - gers, work, with si - ckle in hand, We__
 live by our la - bour and wor - ship the land; For__ ma - ny a bun - dle of
 cane must be bound, In the mea-dows a' - wa - ving ere mas - ter comes round, For__

²⁴ Quoted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes.

dim. poco a poco al fine

ma - ny a bun - dle of cane must be bound, Ere the sun sinks low in the

rall.

fo - rest, low in the fo - rest, low in the fo - rest.

These words make a work song of what Cable in both his versions obviously intended as a dance song, with mischievous words. Audiences not familiar with slave songs might not realize the incongruity, but work songs, encouraged by overseers to keep a steady tempo of body movements in any kind of labour, like cutting grain or moving cargo, can hardly be conceived in a rapid tempo. Slave work, hours on end under a hot sun, could not be kept at a pace used for a spirited song.

When Cable was writing 'The Grandissimes', he tried to include other songs, but his publishers overruled him. His interest continued, however, and during the summer of 1884 he joined Henry Edward Krehbiel, music critic of the *New York Tribune*, in field research; they collected a large number of negro songs—too many, as it turned out, because the sheer bulk of the resulting manuscript discouraged the Century Company from publishing it. By way of compromise the firm agreed to buy two lengthy articles for the *Century Magazine*: 'The Dance in Place Congo' and 'Creole Slave Songs', printed in the February and April issues of 1886.²⁵ Krehbiel, who by then had withdrawn from the collaboration, gave Cable due credit in his own monumental 'Afro-American Folksongs'.²⁶

Numerous collectors have followed the lead of Cable and Krehbiel; there is almost no end to the songs and their variants that can be collected. As with the main theme of Delius's tone-poem 'Appalachia', certain themes in 'Koanga' suggest actual songs known to collectors and, without being exact reproductions, are loyal to the general character of songs in the Southern slave tradition. But Delius had a better memory for music than for words, and "literary enthusiasm rather than literary taste".²⁷ In the following 'Koanga' excerpt the music is both Delian and faithful to the Afro-American original, but the words, though not as poor as some of the opera's diction, represent only Delius and Keary:²⁸

ff

Come out, nig-gers, come out to cut the wa - ving cane; The

²⁵ *Century Magazine*, xxi, pp. 517-32, 807-28.

²⁶ 'Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music' (New York, 1914).

²⁷ Hutchings, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²⁸ Quoted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes.

moon - light sha-dows are fa-ded and the day is back a-gain. The
 hum-ming bird is wa-king, good nig-gers don't com-plain; So
 come once more and has-ten to the fields of su - gar cane!

Had Delius been acquainted with certain writers in England—James M. Barrie, Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James—he might have met Cable, whom all these men entertained in the course of his visit to England in 1898. There was a veritable ‘Cable boom’ just at the time. New English editions of ‘The Grandissimes’ appeared in 1898 and 1899, and during Cable’s visit notables attended the London drawing-room readings which his friends arranged. In addition to reading from his own works he sang a Creole song each time. He read before a larger group in London’s Memorial Hall. On weekend visits at the homes of Conan Doyle and Kipling he sang in the evenings accompanying himself on the guitar.²⁹ Listening to Cable might have prompted Delius to revise the Keary text, to bring it closer to the actuality that Cable had sought to capture in his novel.

In 1896, when he began work on ‘Koanga’, Delius hoped that it might be staged the next year in London; but it was never given in England during his lifetime. The world première was in Elberfeld, Germany, in March 1904, with Fritz Cassirer conducting. An American, Clarence Whitehill, played the title role; he balked at appearing on stage clad in a leopard skin (a preposterous costume for Louisiana) and with his own skin entirely blacked.³⁰ Rosa Kaiser, in the role of Palmyra, disliked her costume too, and developed a tendency to have a sore throat; it took considerable tact to persuade her that the beautiful quadron was “one of America’s favorite legends” and that the costume was actually very attractive. Mrs. Delius had designed the costumes, and the conductor’s wife had helped her make some of them.³¹ As Delius’s sister recalled the opening night, Whitehill was applauded enthusiastically for the magnificent and imposing figure he presented, and Delius was

²⁹ Arlin Turner, ‘George W. Cable: A Biography’ (Durham, N. C., 1956), pp. 306 foll.

³⁰ Born in 1871 in Marengo, Iowa, Whitehill was working in a Chicago express office when Melba advised him to study in Paris. His career was meteoric: début in Brussels, engagements at the Opéra-Comique, and in opera companies in Germany. In 1909 he joined the Metropolitan Opera Company. In face and figure Whitehill resembled George Washington.

³¹ Ian Copley, ‘A Delius Miniature and Some Memories’, *Music & Letters*, xliii (1962), p. 4.

called to the stage again and again after the final curtain.³²

The score was taken in 1914 to London, where some time later it was mislaid. Not until 1930 was it located by Patrick Hadley, subsequently Professor of Music at Cambridge, who recalled the event in 1962:

There is not much to tell about my running to earth the score of 'Koanga'. I had been staying at Grez where I managed to elicit all the remembered data about when & where it was last seen *et cetera*. I forget most of the details but I do remember putting two & two together and putting the chances *fairly* high that it might be amongst the extensive stock of the Goodwin & Tabb Hire Library. I happened to be in constant touch with this Firm & its personnel so on return to London I hastened to 34 Percy Street W.C.1, their then premises, and expatiated the situation. They wouldn't let me search in person but they put 2 or 3 men onto it who laid their hands on it after a weekend's hunt. I post-hasted over by that night's boat and delivered it the following mid-day.³³

This manuscript score of 'Koanga', in three large volumes, is now owned by Jacksonville University, a gift from the Delius Trust at the Delius centenary in 1962. The English text is hand-written in black ink; a German version, in red, is above the English. Both show extensive changes, presumably made during rehearsals at Elberfeld. Dynamic markings are of two kinds: Delius's in black ink, another set—probably made by Cassirer—in blue crayon. Eric Fenby, of all men the best qualified to judge, has described the score as containing a great many errors: wrong notes, missing accidentals, miscalculations in dynamic markings, all of which were faithfully copied into the orchestral parts and were not corrected at rehearsals. A composer experienced in conducting would have corrected most of these flaws; but Delius seldom conducted. His narrow preoccupation with intensity of feeling, Fenby suggests, explains the lack of dramatic action in 'Koanga', the absurd stage situations, and the tameness of the musical characterization.³⁴

The most conspicuous changes made in the score are the deletions of every reference to the De Grapion family. Music and words went out together—a bar here, a page there; the decision to cut must have been made late in the rehearsal period, when there was no time to revise only the words. In 'The Grandissimes' the De Grapions, prior to the action, have been cheated out of their inheritance, and it is Honoré Grandissime's moral problem to decide how to make amends consistent with honour without jeopardizing his own family's financial security. Delius had not been able, apparently, to strip the Bras-Coupé story, as told by Cable, of the personal relation-

³² Clare Delius Black, 'Frederick Delius: Memories of My Brother' (London, 1935), p. 147.

³³ Personal letter from P. A. S. Hadley, 24 December 1962. Quoted by permission.

³⁴ Eric Fenby, 'The Young Delius: An Idyll of the "Nineties"', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1935.

ships tying that story to the rest of the novel. The conductor or some other member of the Elberfeld staff must have noticed that the De Grapion element was extraneous, potentially confusing to an audience, a form of excess baggage to be jettisoned for the opera's benefit.

The score was copied for the first performance in England, at Covent Garden on 23 September 1935, a year after Delius died. Every effort was made to ensure a production that would be both an artistic and a popular success and would earn favourable attention from the critics. Sir Thomas Beecham, indefatigable as ever as a proponent of Delius, conducted (though he arrived eight minutes late, which for him was not unusual). He and Edward Agate had revised the work, putting it in the form that is now available in print; the vocal score is by Fenby. One change was the insertion of the 'Irmelin' prelude during a shift of scenery. Costumes and sets were designed by N. DeMolas. The cast included John Brownlee (Koanga), Leyland White (Don José), Frank Sale (the overseer, Simon Perez), Constance Willis (Don José's wife, Clotilde), and Oda Slobodskaya (Palmyra). Maude Willis was the principal dancer; the choreography was by Anthony Tudor.³⁵ But the vast effort did not succeed in establishing the opera in the standard repertory.

Richard Capell, reviewing the production, suggested that a cruel fate had prevented the introduction of 'Koanga' when it was new, for in his opinion it "has not many superiors among the operas of the 1890's". It was the work of an immature Delius, but even so "it is still worth hearing".³⁶ A second critic revealed only his own ignorance by remarking that Delius had named the opera after a jackdaw, a very clever bird that could locate jewellery lost by the family. The only approach to accuracy of this whimsical assertion is the fact that for years Delius owned a jackdaw which he had named after the opera's hero. A third reviewer stressed the dream-like qualities of the opera; the epilogue, he thought, suggested that the bevy of girls, after listening to Uncle Joe's story, had the illusion of only imagining its reality. The best music, in this critic's opinion, was in the entr'actes, when the stage was dark and empty of characters.³⁷ Dyneley Hussey, writing for *The Spectator*, considered 'Koanga' too intimate for a theatre as vast as Covent Garden, and too subtle for the Covent Garden audience, accustomed as it was to broad strokes. He attributed the lack of action to Delius's attempt to imitate 'Tristan und Isolde'; Verdi might have made more of the possibilities of the story. Yet Hussey found "a great deal of beautiful music" in 'Koanga', not only in the entr'actes but also in the negro choruses and especially in the epilogue. The opera had a remarkable

³⁵ From the original programme, copy owned by Delius Trust.

³⁶ 'Delius's Negro Opera, Koanga at Covent Garden', unlocated clipping in scrapbook owned by Felix Aprahamian.

³⁷ Unlocated reviews in Aprahamian scrapbook.

texture, he thought, "for music written 40 years ago. There is almost always something to enchant the senses, if the mind can keep alert to perceive the enchantment under the hypnotic spell of Delius's unvarying mellifluousness".³⁸

Ernest Newman concluded that the composer had little talent for opera and a weak sense of theatre. Did he and his librettist, Newman asked, really suppose that negro slaves would say: "The dawn begins to gild the east"? Other works by Delius, including 'Sea-Drift' (from Whitman) and 'A Mass of Life' (based on Nietzsche), show effective interpenetration of words and music, but in general, Newman thought, Delius set the sensitive listener's teeth on edge with his awkward handling of words. All the characters in 'Koanga' talk alike, and each talks much the same way regardless of altered circumstances. Early in Act I, Newman observed, six principals sing simultaneously different words in different rhythms, creating an interesting web of music but over-taxing the most sensitive ear to absorb the multiple communication. Wagnerians may be reminded of the quintet in 'Die Meistersinger', but Wagner introduced it to bring the action to a momentary head, whereas Delius was presenting the initial motives that provide the essential conflict of the story. Newman thought that Delius was groping for a new kind of musical drama; but he lacked Wagner's mature grasp of good theatre, and the problems proved insuperable for himself, for his librettist and for the conventional theatre.³⁹

Critics have often been proved entirely wrong in subsequent judgment, but no substantive reversal of opinion can be cited for 'Koanga', perhaps because it has too seldom been produced to prompt much critical comment. The most favourable recent judgment may be that of John W. Klein in *Music Review* in 1961: "Certainly the complete neglect of such a colourful and sumptuously orchestrated opera remains a mystery". Klein considered it "a remarkable imaginative portrayal of a primitive cruelty-ridden community in the Deep South at the end of the century". Yet he found it handicapped by its far-fetched prologue and epilogue, and, in a summary statement, observed that "not even in colourful *Koanga* could Delius resign himself to the earthbound requirements of the stage".⁴⁰

'The Grandissimes' has itself gone up and down in critical esteem, but the Bras-Coupé story is patently excellent material for an opera. All critics of 'Koanga' agree that its music is beyond reproach; it needs only, as Fenby has pointed out, some tightening

³⁸ "Koanga" at Covent Garden', *The Spectator*, clv (27 September 1935), p. 463.

³⁹ Ernest Newman, 'Delius and the Opera. A Quest for the Impossible', in the Arahamian scrapbook. Newman made two mistakes: it was the overseer Simon Perez who sang the words: "The dawn begins to gild the east", and there were five, not six, principals singing together in Act I.

⁴⁰ John W. Klein, 'Delius as a Musical Dramatist', *Music Review*, xx (1961), pp. 294-301.

up and final corrections. If the good story and the equally good music are not to go down to oblivion in their merged operatic form, a radical revision of the libretto seems essential. Nobody with Keary's limitations, or Delius's, could handle it adequately. It would require someone familiar with negro music and with the negroes themselves. Percy Grainger once said of Delius that his "absorbing interest in the Negro . . . was purely that of an onlooker".⁴¹ Born to wealth and an aristocrat in temperament, it was probably not possible for Delius even to approach sympathetic understanding. Very subtle in his music, moreover, he lacked the capacity for literary subtlety; the principals in 'Koanga', as Beecham wrote, "have an odd unreality that fails to command our complete sympathy and interest".⁴²

The actress Fanny Kemble, in a journal she kept while living on an island plantation in coastal Georgia, expressed great admiration for the singing of the slaves: "The high voices all in unison, and the admirable time and true accent with which their responses are made, always make me wish that some great musical composer could hear these semi-savage performances. With a little skilful adaptation and instrumentation, I think one or two barbaric chants and choruses might be evoked from them that would make a fortune of an opera".⁴³ Half a century later, Delius, hearing comparable singing on the St. Johns River in Florida and in the tobacco stemmeries of Virginia, was equally enthusiastic; and his choice of the *Bras-Coupé* story reflects sound instinct. Unfortunately, he was not content with "a little skilful adaptation", or with the story as he found it in Cable. He saw no more in Cable's novel than many of its contemporary readers, and unaware of Cable's social conscience and the reconstruction problems of the 1870's, which so concerned the author, did with the book precisely what could be expected of an admirer of Wagner who was throughout his life, in the phrase of Heinrich Simon, "a hedonist of the senses".⁴⁴ With a new libretto, restoring Cable's intent, 'Koanga' might have just the effect that Delius in 1894 thought opera capable of—working by means of music upon people who are tired of being preached to.

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⁴¹ 'About Delius', in material added by Hubert Foss to his revised edition of Peter Warlock's 'Frederick Delius' (London, 1952), p. 171.

⁴² Beecham, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴³ Frances Anne Kemble, 'Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation 1838-1839' (New York, 1863), p. 218. The rice and cotton plantation owned by Miss Kemble's husband, Pierce Butler, was on an island at the mouth of the Altamaha River.

⁴⁴ Heinrich Simon, 'Frederick Delius', *Musical Opinion*, lviii (1935), p. 406.