

## X. A SONG OF THE HIGH HILLS

COMPOSED: 1911

FIRST PERFORMANCE: 1920, London, Albert Coates, Conductor

TEXT: wordless

FORCES REQUIRED: Soprano and Tenor Solo, SATB Chorus, Orchestra

*The Song of the High Hills* is Delius's most ambitious work involving wordless chorus. In no other composition does the writing utilize such complexities in vocal texture or independence of part writing. The maximum vocal scoring includes eight part chorus (SSAATTBB) and soprano and tenor solo, combining initially a cappella to achieve an extraordinary effect in the midst of a lush orchestral tone poem.

The work has produced novel literary description of its supposed program, originated probably by Heseltine and imitated by the later biographers:

If the form of *Songs of Sunset* seems like the very curve and cadence of grey evening imprinted in a film of music, the structure of *A Song of the High Hills* is like the rugged outline of a great range of mountains whose heights are hidden from the eyes in cloud. The music is full of a sense of spacious solitudes and far horizons. The elation of the ascent is succeeded by a mood of ecstatic contemplation, and the soul rises through the pure still air to the very heights of rapture, losing all consciousness of itself as the mountain-tops are lost from the ken of man, among the wandering mists and the eternal snows. Certain commentators on the work have thought fit to see, in the relation between the chorus and the orchestra in this work, some such opposed relation as is supposed to exist between the mountaineer and the peak which baffles his attempts to scale it. But the relation is more spiritual than that. It is only a false materialistic duality that can regard Man and Nature as separate entities pitted against each other in opposition; for the aspects of Nature are only the manifestations in terms of matter of the diverse aspects of the soul of Man that ebbs with autumn and flows with the tide of spring, aspires to heaven with the mountains, sings in the winds and runs with rivers along the waters of time.<sup>1</sup>

Beecham continues:

*A Song of the High Hills* is the longest as well as his most impressive work written in a single movement. It is built on an heroic scale and the inspiration is on an exalted level throughout. It has also a certain austerity of manner that we have not encountered before, and which appears to be associated in the composer's mind with the emotions roused by the contemplation of great heights. The ascent of and descent from

the High Hills is cunningly depicted in music of a totally different character from that which greets us when the summit has been attained, where we have a magical sequence of sounds and echoes, both vocal and instrumental, all culminating in a great outburst of tone that seems to flood the entire landscape. The first entrance of the full choir singing as softly as possible is surely a stroke of genius and of its kind without equal, either by him or any other composer.<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Hutchings's commentary obviously emulates the same description:

The whole work has the shape of a peak; it opens on the lower slopes in triple lyrical rhythm wherein Delius's ranging pantheism makes little parallel with Beethoven's 'awakening of happy feelings on reaching the country.' Instead we have a series of emotional and spiritual experiences such as might accompany a day's mountaineering. The song-like opening changes to quiet tensility during the first vistas of ascent, becoming more and more animated until the heights are reached. A tremendous exultation, expressed by the orchestra in full splendour, passes, with echo effects among the instruments, to the quiet rapture of divided strings. At this spiritual climax the voices take over, at first seeming to come from the distance, while the quivering strings soar to the thin heights of their speech, and bring the snow-capped summits before our eyes.

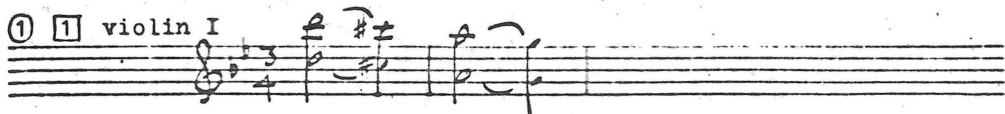
The picture as such, that is to say as a sensory rather than a spiritual experience, recedes when the strings fade into mist and the voices take over, necessarily at a lower pitch and more solid tone, despite the mark "pppp". The voices are concerned with human emotion rather than musical photography; they cease as we leave the heights, and the orchestral music of descent is made of materials heard during ascent.<sup>3</sup>

However, the most telling comment on the character of the work and its composer is revealed in Beecham's concluding remarks in his biography:

Grieg's theory concerning the inseparability of the man and his music receives some confirmation from the change of character and feeling of the latter which coincided with the period of Frederick's metamorphosis of mind and spirit. The iron which had begun to enter his soul about 1902 had become firmly set there by 1911, and from that time on we hear less of the poetry and charm which delighted us in *Sea Drift* and *In a Summer Garden*. In their place we have hitherto unfamiliar elements of austerity and impersonality, as if the composer had grown tired of interpreting the joys and sorrows of human beings and had turned to the contemplation of Nature only. This is markedly observable in the two great works of transistion, *A Song of the High Hills* and *North Country Sketches*, and although there is no falling away here of power and mastery, we do not find it easy to suppress a twinge of longing for the fragrant and affectionate intimacy of an earlier day.<sup>4</sup>

Structurally, the work easily possesses an arch form at least in terms of musical material. A very loose ABA exists with associated motivic ideas:

① 1 violin I



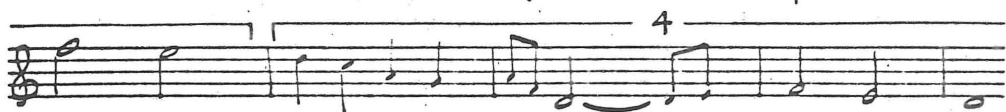
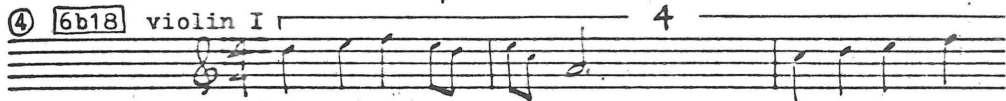
② 1 viola



③ 4 flute I



④ 6b18 violin I



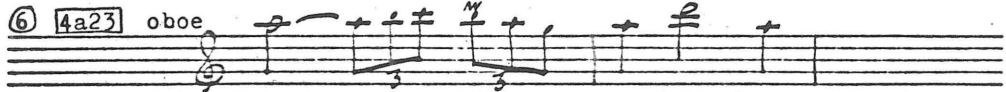
⑤ 4a21 tenors a6



⑤a 5a23 cello, bass



⑥ 4a23 oboe



⑥a 24 oboe



- A - opening - 4a [17] (orchestral)  
B - 5a [17] - 1b [35] (choral-orchestral)  
A' - [35] - the end (orchestral)

However, the sense of climax which one might associate strictly with the supposed "summit" is a bit misleading, because there are powerful high points of musical energy throughout the work.

As with *Appalachia* I will confine my remarks to the vocal sections of the work, and refer the reader to the Grimes dissertation for detail concerning the purely orchestral material.

The work includes a number of significant motifs, employed in various ways. The majority occur only in the orchestra, ①, ②, ③, ⑤a, and ⑥; others appear with both orchestra and vocal statements, ④ and ⑥a; and one motif, ⑤, is the sole province of the voice.

#### Section B

B divides into a basic tripartite form, aba', with all sections involving voices in some way:

- a - 5a [17] - 3a [23]  
b - 4a [23] - 6a [27]  
a' - 4b [28] - 1b [35]

a The section consists of three parts, i, ii, and iii: an initial statement of ④, an eight bar melody consisting of two four bar phrases, 5a [17] - 4a [18]; a second developmental section involving two further statements of ④ and the appearance of ⑤, 5a [18] - 4a [21]; and a concluding part which serves as a transition to b, 4a [21] - 3a [23].

i After a two measure transistional horn figure, ④ is heard quietly in muted violin I, 7a [17], against a lush string accompaniment and a distinct counter melody sung by four tenors. This tenor phrase is the first vocal utterance in the piece, and is marked *to sound as*

*if in the far distance* . (Delius makes a further stipulation concerning choral tone in prefatory remarks to the work: "The chorus must be sung on the vowel which will produce the richest tone possible.") Following the statement of ④, the remaining voices are added to the texture (four per part in SSAATTBB), creating with the strings a lush sonority of great beauty, and enhancing the quality of the final chord of i (g diminished suspended over a D-A fifth) with a shimmering nine part texture sung *pppp*.

ii This subsection is almost totally orchestral and consists basically of two statements of ④ separated by sequential development of material derivable from ④ which will later return in a', specifically the architecture of the climactic violin I line. The second statement of ④ beginning 5a [20], appears initially as counterpoint to the subsiding climax of the middle section, and after its conclusion, ii ends with the highly mysterious and evocative appearance of ⑤, sung by six tenors against sustaining strings.

iii This part serves as a quieting transistion to b, and includes a distinctive harp, celesta, and string sonority wedded to subtle harmonic movement.

b An entirely new mood of pastoral calm is created in b by sequential repetition of ⑥ and ⑥a in the woodwinds over delicate strings. ⑤a is heard in the lowest orchestral voices, suggesting brief moments of energy. The section ends with a second entrance of ⑤, now slightly altered, followed by ⑥a in soprano I over a sustaining chord in the other voices, and a final augmented statement of ⑤a in the bassoons and bass clarinet.

a' This section can also be divided into three basic sections, i, ii, and iii, which correspond to a certain degree to those of a:

i - 4b [28] - 1b [30]

ii - 1a [30] - 1b [32]

iii - 1b [32] - 1b [35]

i Introduced and accompanied by ornamented statements of (6) and (6a), this subsection features a haunting version of (4) sung by a solo tenor from the chorus. It is slightly altered and extended, and because of the high tessitura presents a mood of great beauty. A distant horn call, suggestive of 5a [17], over tympani rolls and sustaining strings concludes i and prepares mysteriously for the *ppp* entrance of the a cappella chorus.

ii This unique and beautiful moment in *The Song of the High Hills* consists of a soprano statement of (4) accompanied by the seven lower voices, and two extended repetitions of (5) sung in octaves by a soprano and tenor soloist against the eight part choral texture. This passage is unlike any other in all of Delius's music save those in the wordless part songs *To be sung of a summer night on the water*, and because of its location within the extended orchestral work the comparison is slight. The vocal texture, especially between [31] and [32], is incredibly complex and stirring in effectiveness. Yet the climax is to come when the vocal sonority - the human emotion as Heseltine calls it, is united with the total resources of the orchestra to create the thrilling summit of the work.

iii With the addition of the strings in [32] the climax begins, tracing its path over similar melodic and harmonic contours as those found in a. As the winds and brass enter 4b [33] the total forces combine surging toward the moment of supreme ecstasy at [33]. In the following two bars the previous sequential pattern is reversed, and 4a [33] at the *In Tempo* the vocal and orchestral forces diverge, becoming less and

less similar as the gradual *descrescendo* begins. The flutes and violin I establish their own melody against the decreasing vocal *tesitura*, and remain in their high range, almost refusing to descend, finally leading upward to [35] and the return of A' at *Tempo I*.

The texture throughout iii is incredible, with as many as ten different lines existing at one time, and even though an obvious harmonic progression can be ascertained, it is clear that Delius must have gone to great lengths to maintain a contrapuntal integrity throughout the total texture. There is a certain amount of doubling present and yet there are moments of extreme independence, such as the two measures of "bugle call" lines in soprano I, II and tenor I, 1-2a [34], which help to reinforce the uniqueness of the various parts.

The textural "orgy" subsides dramatically after [35] with the return of ① and ② in its initial scoring. The gradual descent present through 2a [37] is mirrored in the chorus, as the texture decreases, dropping to a final bass II line marked *only a sigh* in 2b [37] - 2a [37].

However, a momentary resurgence occurs in the voices as the tenors and sopranos rise briefly to accompany the return of ③ in violin I and viola, 2b [38], only to fade *pppp* never to be heard again. The orchestra will continue with one final exalted climax at [44] which matches musically that of [16], before fading with ① and ②, and ending with a haunting return of ⑥ and ⑥a over distant strings and tympani.

. . . . .

And what would this work be without the voices, could it too like *Appalachia* be simplified for a smaller scale performance? Agreement with such a suggestion would be absurd. It would rob Delius of his ultimate method of musical expression. Chromatic sequencing with purely orchestral timbres can only reach so far before emotional saturation occurs. In the idiom of Delius only

with the addition of another sonority and the element of human emotion can a further summit be reached - where the instruments of man and by man unite to find the highest goal.



## Footnotes

1. Heseltine, p. 126
2. Beecham, p. 169
3. Hutchings, p. 111-12
4. Beecham, p. 221