

DELIUS FEST SALUTES ENGLISH COMPOSER'S FLORIDA SOJOURN

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Composer Frederick Delius arrived at Solano Grove, on the banks of the St. John's River, in March 1884. His father had hopes that the young man would show more initiative in managing an orange plantation in a new land, as opposed to his painful disinterest in the family wool business back in England. Fred surprised no one by leaving the oranges to a caretaker and traveling the 35 miles north by steamer to Jacksonville, where he studied music with Thomas Ward, a church organist.

Each year, the Delius Association of Florida and the city of Jacksonville hold a festival in celebration of this unique composer's music and his time spent in the state. Praised by Richard Strauss, and a friend of Grieg, Gauguin and other notables, Delius was a true cosmopolitan who eventually studied in Germany, made friends in Norway, and settled in France.

His music is like no other's, but might be described as Impressionism meets hedonism, leavened with aristocratic refinement. He produced six operas, four concertos, A Mass of Life based on the philosophy of Nietzsche, and a great many tone poems. He died in 1934, blind and paralyzed, but not before dictating several last works to his amanuensis Eric Fenby, a young man who selflessly dedicated himself to coping with the master's difficult temperament and communications.

Delius loved Florida and found much musical inspiration in the sounds of the black laborers on nearby plantations. The 2004 Delius Festival concentrated on the influence of late 19th century African-American music on many of the composer's works, with lectures and symposia.

The Friday Morning Musicale presented a reception in honor of the festival, and the superb Solano Singers offered a concert of choral works by the composer and his friend Gustav Holst, with singing of ravishing beauty.

The festival reached its high point with a concert by the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra under renowned conductor David Lloyd-Jones. Florida Suite showed the audience just what they've been missing all these years. Although early Delius, and somewhat influenced by Grieg, its four movements are sensuously melodic, gorgeously orchestrated and rich in creative ideas.

The American Fantasy of 1896, heard in what might well be its American premiere, was eventually expanded to become the composer's famous Appalachia. In this early form it incorporates Dixie and Yankee Doodle without
y discovered Negro Songs for Soloist, Chorus and
ters College Concert Choir singing their hearts out.

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The music was direct in communication, quite lovely, and representative of a composer many consider to have been the last great apostle of Romanticism in music.

In addition to screening a film on the composer, this year's events included a trip to the site of Solano Grove and a journey by boat on the St. John's River that Delius loved so much. The festival whetted the appetite for more Delius discoveries in years to come.

Alan Becker is a Davie-based freelance writer.

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