



A MASS OF LIFE

by Leon Botstein

Written for the concert *A Mass of Life*, performed on April 5, 2016 at Carnegie Hall.

The life and work of Frederick Delius defy both characterization and comparison. His music is distinctive in the sense that its individuality is unmistakable and its style reveals influences only obliquely. Delius was born a British subject, and we have become used to associating him with an “English” sensibility, but Delius suggests little of what sounds English in the music of Elgar, for example. In fact there are those who reject entirely the idea that there is anything particularly “English” about his music. Perhaps this is because there seems to be too much unedited expressiveness in Delius’ music; indeed there is a fabric of sonority and harmonies we would more likely think of as French. He did write a symphonic poem in 1899 entitled *Paris: Song of a Great City* and he took up residence there eventually. Delius was in the habit of connecting landscape with musical form. In terms of form, in his instrumental and operatic music, one can therefore detect the influence of Liszt and a Wagnerian impulse towards extended musical narration, sustained by dense reliance on chromatic harmonies free of the rigorous formal and rhythmic traditions championed by Max Reger.

Delius may have grown up in England, but his family was of German origin and as an adult he only lived in England briefly during World War I. But before he settled outside of Paris, he also lived in Florida and Virginia, nominally running a citrus farm and pursuing music as both student and teacher. This was unusual for an aspiring European. America left an indelible impression on Delius—both its landscape and people, notably the African American population of the South. Delius’ training after he returned from America was largely German though among his staunchest advocates were Scandinavians. But he attached himself to no school or style and his improbable sojourns in Europe and North America ended up rendering him an outsider everywhere: an English composer who lived in France, whose work was championed and published in Germany and who was as attached to the poetry of Walt Whitman as he was to that of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Delius’ uncompromising but intuitive individuality led not only to his being at the margins of European musical life during his lifetime, but an object of controversy, which he remains. Few composers seem to elicit such strong reactions. Delius’ partisans have been and remain uncommonly vociferous. Most famous among them was Sir Thomas Beecham, who worked tirelessly on Delius’ behalf. But the list includes the conductor Fritz Cassirer, scion of one of Germany’s most illustrious extended families, and Florent Schmitt, the French composer. Detractors have found the music too meandering, too atmospheric and ill-formed and without any persuasive rhythmic pacing. Deryck Cooke, the eminent English scholar who was one of the first to attempt a completion of the 10th symphony of Mahler, is reputed to have quipped that to admit to being a Delius partisan was akin to confessing to being a drug addict.

Delius was born to a prosperous merchant family and struggled to persuade his father to support a career in music. He essentially trained himself, with periods of formal study (primarily in Leipzig), but he was never a performer and he never entirely shed the image of being perhaps nothing more than a self-trained gentleman amateur. Readers may bristle at this or the following comparison, but in terms of reputation, context, and reception, Delius is suggestive of the career of Charles Ives in America. Ives’ music is certainly American in a way Delius’ is not English, but both were innovators who lived at the margins of musical culture, operating on their own, iconoclasts and fiercely independent individuals. Both had a biographical connection to the turn of the century world of business and the tensions between artistic sensibilities and the world of commerce. Amateurism was lauded and professionalism derided. Delius and Ives lived in a culture in which the central argument of Thomas Mann’s masterpiece—the fate of the aesthetic in modernity—in the 1901 novel *Buddenbrooks* resonated throughout Europe and North America, well beyond Mann’s native Bremen.

The mention of Thomas Mann is apt, since he and Delius came of age in the historical moment when Friedrich Nietzsche was the key influential philosophical voice for a new generation. Nietzsche’s most famous book, perhaps the finest piece of German poetry to be written since the death of Goethe, *Also Sprach Zarathustra, A Book for All or None*, was a sensation when it first appeared in 1883. It put forward a trans-valuation of the meaning of good and evil, challenged the language of morality, lamented the influence of Christianity, pilloried the marketplace, journalism, social conventions, hierarchies of learning, the conceits of democracy, and celebrated the potential of the individual, as artist—in the world, in the present—without any concern for a mythic afterlife.

Delius was awestruck by this text. It seemed to vindicate his personal life journey. It confirmed his atheism and offered a defense of his commitment to music. Nietzsche himself harbored dreams of becoming a composer, and no art form was as central to his outlook as music. It is therefore no wonder among Delius’ finest works is the setting of Nietzsche’s text in the ironic form of a “Mass”; but this Mass is precisely an inversion of the Christian orthodoxy implied by the title. Delius employs the ritual association of the word Mass against itself. For this “Mass” celebrates the human and temporal existence, not the promise of death and salvation on the grounds that life on

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earth, in one's body, is somehow a punishment, a temporary compromise whose end will be, one hopes, the immortality of the soul.

A Mass of Life is one of the great choral works of its time. Its infrequency in concert is to be lamented. The reasons for its obscurity include of course its logistical demands and Delius' own reputation and marginal place in the standard repertory. But the reasons also include the text. Delius' Whitman settings seem more inviting, since Whitman is embraced as the true voice of American patriotism. Nietzsche on the other hand has gained a reputation as a destructive voice, as an apologist for nihilism and violence, for the anti-social, for elitist snobbery, obscurantist thought, and above all as an inspiration for the Nazis.

Nietzsche's writings are truly hard to categorize, and the disputes about his meanings and influence will not cease. But only selected attributes about the text inspired Delius. First, Nietzsche's language is as musical as possibly can be imagined. It sings and dances its way off the page. Second, one of the few philosophers and writers Nietzsche admired deeply was Ralph Waldo Emerson. That fact links him oddly to America, and thereby offers another perspective on why Delius, an Englishman who worked in America, who fell in love with aspects of its non-aristocratic culture (consider Delius' 1903 work *Appalachia*) including its most populist poet, Whitman, would have been so susceptible to the greatness of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, one of the few works of literature to have, for better or worse, a decisive historical impact.