

FREDERICK DELIUS, NICK DRAKE, AND 'RIVER MAN'

Bill Thompson discusses the music of Nick Drake, and the singer's affinity for Delius's music.

I discovered the music of Delius at the age of 16 in 1969 and, as I started my college years, I was a frequent listener to both classical and rock radio stations. One evening in 1972, I was in my dorm room with the radio tuned in to a Houston FM rock station when the DJ started playing an unfamiliar song: I was entranced by the sounds of the solo acoustic



guitar and the subdued, breathy vocal. At the end of the song, the announcer identified the song as *Parasite* by Nick Drake (pictured, above). I had never heard of Nick Drake, but I soon acquired his album *Pink Moon*, which included the track I had heard. I also purchased the album *Nick Drake*, which was an American release containing eight songs selected from his first two UK albums: *Five Leaves Left* (1969) and *Bryter Layter* (1970). *River Man* was one of those eight songs, and by listening to the US album and to the *Pink Moon* album, I became a devoted fan of Nick Drake's music. Two years passed, and I was shocked in 1974 to learn that he had passed away at the age of 26. Over the years, I was pleased that more Nick Drake recordings were discovered and released, and that his music became more popular as time went on.

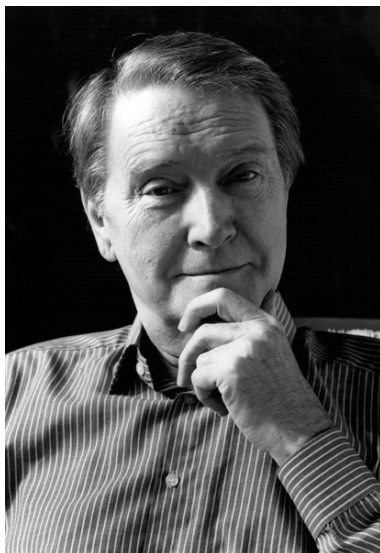
Obviously, the music of both Frederick Delius and Nick Drake had found a receptive audience in me. However, I had no idea that Nick Drake himself had an affinity for Delius's music. I first learned about this by reading the book *White Bicycles* by Joe Boyd, the American who had produced Nick's albums for Island Records in the UK. Boyd discussed the wide variety of styles that had influenced Nick's music:

'Nick listened carefully to [Bob] Dylan, to Bert Jansch and Davey Graham, and to genteel bluesmen like Josh White and Brownie McGhee. He

enjoyed Delius and Chopin, Miles Davis and Django Reinhardt, and read English poetry ... But analyses of his influences have difficulty explaining the originality of his music, particularly the shape of his chords.¹

Nick's Cambridge friend Robert Kirby had done the string arrangements for several songs on *Five Leaves Left*. Boyd shares the story of Nick's specific desires for the string arrangement for his song *River Man*:

'*Five Leaves Left*'s final piece fell into place when [Robert] Kirby announced that he was not up to *River Man*. He had tried but just couldn't manage what he knew Nick wanted and what the song deserved. [Producer] John Wood immediately suggested Harry Robinson (pictured, above). As a composer he had scored all those Hammer horror movies starring vampires-in-chief Christopher Lee and Barbara Steele. John came to the point: as an orchestrator, Harry was a master mimic. You want Sibelius? He could give you Sibelius. Since Nick wanted *River Man* to sound like Delius, Harry, said John, was our man. Nick and I went to visit Robinson at his house hidden in the middle of Barnes Common. Having heard a tape, Harry was already intrigued when we arrived. Nick played the song through, then strummed chords as the tape played, showing Harry what textures he wanted for the string parts. I had never heard him [Nick] so articulate or so demanding. Harry made notes and nodded. The result was a track which - next to *Pink Moon* (which was used in a popular Volkswagen ad) - is the most often played and discussed of all Nick's songs. Whenever I saw Harry in later years, he would talk about the day we recorded it, with Nick surrounded by the orchestra, playing and singing while Harry conducted - just like Nelson Riddle and Frank Sinatra.²



In his 2023 book *Nick Drake: The Life*, Richard Morton Jack gives more detail about the studio session for *River Man*:

'On the evening of Monday, 21st April (1969) Nick presented himself at Sound Techniques. Fourteen musicians awaited him, alongside Harry Robinson. It was Nick's turn to be apprehensive; he had not yet heard the

arrangement for 'River Man'. In another indication of Nick's confidence where his music was concerned, John Wood remembers him asking for it to be tweaked as it was performed - there were certain figures he wanted played as longer notes instead - and Harry graciously assenting. There was unanimous agreement that the result was another triumph, nodding both toward Frederick Delius and John Barry, and serving the song immaculately.³

Robert Kirby was never shy of paying tribute to Robinson for perfecting the job that had bamboozled him from the outset:

'Harry's string arrangement is barely in 5/4 - it goes along like a limpid river all the way, moving regularly and crossing all over the beats and the 5/4 with it.'⁴

In a video interview and an email message in later years, Joe Boyd made further comments about Nick:

'But I think there is a sophistication, and a kind of internationalist ... very English, but also in touch with very sophisticated ideas about how to be English ... for example, the string arrangements on *River Man* - which Robert Kirby didn't do because he hadn't gotten to 5/4 in music school yet - he got Harry Robinson to do it; and I remember Nick telling Harry Robinson "I want it to sound like Delius." Nick loved Delius, who again, was sort of an English composer who had been transformed by living in Florida and listening to all this black music and Latin American music ...'⁵

'Those two moments - when the not-very-talkative Nick told myself and John Wood that he wanted the *River Man* arrangement to sound something like Delius, and when he repeated that comment during our meeting with Harry Robinson - are the only two times the composer's name crossed his lips in my presence. It was impressive that much of the texture of Harry's arrangement is in response to the complex chords Nick played on the guitar while we were listening to the *River Man* demo with Robinson.'⁶

Delius was of course not the only influence on Nick Drake's music, but the Delius influence was significant:

There are other influences audible as well that are not usually found in folk music, such as modern jazz and baroque and classical music (Nick was particularly fond of Delius and Chopin).⁷

[*River Man*] is also a strange blend of jazz and classical influences (Some see an influence of Ravel here, others see Delius).⁸

I find it interesting that *River Man* was written in 5/4 time; the final movement of the original version of Delius's *Piano Concerto* was written in 5/4, although neither Nick Drake nor Harry Robinson would have been familiar with that version of the work.

Nick's friend and fellow songwriter Robin Frederick made these comments about *River Man* in her liner notes for a Nick Drake box set released in 1986:

... cluster chords add extra notes close to, or are clustered around, the notes of a standard chord. These extra notes introduce a dissonant sound, which when combined with the basic triad, generates a new chord with added complexity, depth and warmth. In *River Man*, Nick uses cluster chords while shifting between major & minor feels. It all works together to create a floating landscape filled with ambivalence and mystery. This is reflected in the lyrics in which seasons and people come and go, and the singer of the song veers between hope and despair as the river flows on while he is denied freedom.⁹

Other friends and family have mentioned Nick and Delius in the same breath. Nick's friend Richard Thompson was guitarist for Fairport Convention, and he provided electric guitar on the sessions for several songs on Nick's albums.

One day Richard Thompson bumped into him [Nick]:

'I was on the Tube platform at Hampstead, heading into central London ... [Nick] must have thought it would be more embarrassing to walk past without acknowledging me before waiting further down the platform, so he came and sat down next to me. This was now awkward for both of us, so I had to strike up a conversation, or what would have to pass for one, between two socially inept introverts.'

At Richard's instigation they discussed Delius and Debussy until the train came.¹⁰



Photo: Keith Morris

Nick Drake

Nick's sister, the actress Gabrielle Drake de Wet, says that recordings of Delius's music were played in the Drake household at Far Leys in Tanworth-in-Arden:

'I know my parents [Rodney and Molly Drake] listened [to Delius], but not sure to which pieces specifically. I also know we were all greatly impressed by and loved Ken Russell's film *Song of Summer* with the superb Max Adrian playing Delius.¹¹

Here are my own thoughts about some other parallels between Frederick Delius and Nick Drake:

- Both defy categorization; their music is *sui generis*.
- Both absorbed and synthesized a variety of influences to arrive at their own unique style.
- Both are best known for music that creates a mood of contemplation.
- Both wrote their music to satisfy themselves; it was not written with the primary goal of achieving popularity or massive sales.
- Both have a 'cult' following; their music has strong appeal to a certain type of listener.
- Both wrote well-known works inspired by their experiences near rivers: Delius with the St Johns and Loing rivers, Nick with the River Cam.
- Additional previously unknown and/or unheard works by both composers continue to be discovered and recordings released, periodically renewing their profiles in the world of music, thereby attracting new listeners and delighting longtime fans.

I am hopeful that Nick Drake fans will discover the music of Frederick Delius, and I suggest that lovers of Delius's music have a listen to the music of Nick Drake.

Bill Thompson

¹ Joe Boyd, *White Bicycles – Making Music in the 1960s* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2006), p262

² Boyd, *op.cit.*, p196

³ Richard Morton Jack, *Nick Drake – The Life* (London: John Murray, 2023), p231-2

⁴ As quoted in the essay *Five Leaves Left* by Pete Paphides in the book *Nick Drake – Remembered For A While: The Authorized Companion to the Music of Nick Drake*, Cally Callomon & Gabrielle Drake, eds. (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2014), p162

- ⁵ Joe Boyd, Joe Boyd on Nick Drake's 'Five Leaves Left' (video in the John Peel Archive Series)
- ⁶ Joe Boyd, email message to author dated 24th July 2023
- ⁷ Peter Hogan, *Nick Drake: The Complete Guide to His Music* (London: Omnibus, 2009), p3
- ⁸ Hogan, op cit, p31
- ⁹ Robin Frederick, liner notes for *Nick Drake: Fruit Tree* (box set) (Hannibal Records, 1986)
- ¹⁰ Jack, op cit, p333
- ¹¹ Gabrielle Drake de Wet, email message to Cally Callomon dated 18th July 2023

Internet links

Video: 'River Man' - song by Nick Drake (1969), string arrangement by Harry Robinson
<https://tinyurl.com/nick-drake-river-man>

Video: 'Lost Boy: In Search of Nick Drake' (BBC Radio 2 audio documentary narrated by Brad Pitt)
<https://tinyurl.com/drake-lost-boy>

Video: Joe Boyd (producer) discusses Nick Drake's album 'Five Leaves Left' and the song 'River Man' with mention of Delius
<https://tinyurl.com/drake-boyd>

Video: 'A Skin Too Few: The Days of Nick Drake' (documentary about Nick Drake and his music)
<https://tinyurl.com/drake-documentary>

Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Drake

Bryter Music – The Estate of Nick Drake (Cally Callomon, executor)
<https://www.brytermusic.com/>

MOJO Magazine cover article about Nick Drake (March 2018)
<http://thompsonian.info/MOJO-Nick-Drake-article-2018-03.pdf>

'A Remembrance of Nick Drake' (Los Angeles Times 8th October 2007)
<https://tinyurl.com/drake-latimes>

'Delius Connections' (web page with information about well-known public figures with an affinity for the music of Delius)
<http://thompsonian.info/delconn.html>

