

THE LAST SUMMER

DAVID HOWARTH

The funeral in the country church was a year delayed, and the widow could not attend—but it was far from gloomy. Sir Thomas Beecham gave the oration by the grave, and a blackbird sang.

TWENTY-SIX years ago, when I was young and more self-confident than I had any right to be, I went to a funeral in a village called Limpsfield in Surrey in the south of England. I have known Limpsfield nearly all my life. My grandfather used to live there, and now I live quite close to it myself; but I have never known it well. It is not on the way to anywhere, and I have very seldom been there since the funeral. But I went one Sunday, to see if I had remembered the scene of the funeral exactly.

I had: I found the grave at once. It is right in the middle of the churchyard, among others closely packed in tidy rows. Limpsfield has changed and grown. It is a village which house agents call "within daily reach" of London, and there are a good many middle-income commuters' houses now round the edge of it, and a very new outbreak of bungalows. Evidently, it has grown more in the last twenty-six years, since I was there, than in the previous seven hundred and fifty, since the square stone tower of the church was built. But among the modern houses, the core of the ancient village can still



be seen: the church itself, some medieval houses, a fourteenth-century lich gate at the entrance to the churchyard, and a beautiful eighteenth-century vicarage. In the churchyard, there are yew trees which look immensely old. It is winter now, and when I went back they were dank and mournful; but when I went to the funeral, it was early summer and a blackbird was singing in them.

The grave has a headstone now, and somebody has planted it with heather. There are only two names on the stone: no claim of fame, or epitaph, or expression of hope of immortality. The names are Frederick Delius and Jelka Delius, man and wife; and the date of her death is marked as the 28th of May, 1935. I must have been there on the 24th of May, because it was his funeral that I attended, and she died, if I remember rightly, four days after it. He had died nearly a year before. That was one of many strange things about the funeral.

I do not know who designed that headstone, which does not bother to tell a passer-by that the man who is buried there was a great composer; but a more pompous memorial would have been out of place, because the music which Delius wrote is always diffident and never flamboyant. I never met him, but if his music is a guide to his character, I should think he would have been perfectly satisfied with a grave which is humbler than most of the graves of the parishioners of Limpsfield.

Delius was an Englishman, and we English have not bred very many great composers, so we are proud of the few we have; but to tell the

truth, his father and mother were both German, and he lived almost all his life in France. He was born in Bradford, in the industrial north of England, in 1862, and he died in France; but before he died, he said he would like to be buried in a country churchyard in the south of England. This was an unexpected request, because he had never had any connection with the south of England or, since his early youth, with the Church of England. But it was perfectly clear that that was what he had said, and so, after a year's delay and some trouble with French official regulations, his body was brought to England and the ceremony at Limsfield was arranged. Limsfield was chosen because Beatrice Harrison, who was a cellist and a friend of Delius', lived there. She was famous in the early days of broadcasting for playing her cello at night in the woods near Limsfield, and thereby encouraging night-ingles to sing into microphones which were hidden in the trees.

There was a very distinguished congregation of musicians in the church that morning, but I am not a musician: I am only a person who likes listening to music, one of those members of English concert audiences whom Sir Thomas Beecham has described, I believe, as not knowing much about music but liking the noise it makes. I only went to Limsfield because I was told to go. I was in the recording department of the BBC, and the news department asked us to record the service so that they could broadcast extracts from it in the news bulletins that night. But it was an assignment I accepted eagerly, because the music of Delius had been one of my early loves, if not the first of all.

I find it very difficult to say why I like listening to Delius, or indeed to any other music. For that matter, real musicians are not very good at explaining what they like. But I must try to describe the emotions which the music of Delius evokes, because that is the point of this story. When I went to the funeral, I had not heard very much of it except some songs and short orchestral pieces, and one of his major works: "Sea Drift," which is a setting for baritone, chorus, and orchestra of a poem by Walt Whitman. I had still to encounter his "Mass of Life" and his con-

certos, and to this day I have never heard any of his operas, which I am rather afraid are dull.

But the short orchestral works still seem to me to be the essence of Delius, and they are the works which have lasted best and are performed most often. "Brigg Fair" is one of them, a setting of a Lincolnshire folk song. The titles of the others suggest the character which is common to them all: "In a Summer Garden," "Summer Night on the River," "A Song before Sunrise," "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring," "A Song of Summer." These are the images found in a great proportion of his music: summer, warm nights, calm flowing water, peace, gentleness, contentment; and one must also add love and companionship, because the music seldom suggests a melancholy solitude. Youth is another ingredient; at least, it seems so to me. Perhaps that is only because I heard the music when I was very young. Delius was in his forties when he wrote the first of it, and he was a sick old man when he wrote the "Song of Summer"; but it still conveys to me a youthful sense of summer, and now that I am in the forties myself, it makes me think sadly but not unhappily of all the warm summers and all the companionships that have ever been. On the back of the envelope of my present record of "Brigg Fair" there is a quotation: "The sorrow that lies at the heart of all mortal joys, the bitterness at the core of all great sweetness." That is very apt. Yet whatever one may write or say about Delius, his music is purer poetry than any poem in words.

THE BLACK BIRD

WHAT I have written so far is common ground, I suppose, however badly I have written it. These are the objective qualities of the music, and it does not make much difference what subjective pictures one adds to them, if one has to add any at all. The music is evocative, not descriptive. I admit that I always picture the First Cuckoo in Spring in the woods in Kent where I live, although I have read somewhere a fact which I would rather not have known: that the perfectly beautiful melody in this work is a folk song from Norway. The summer is a southern English summer, and the river is a backwater of the Thames, or else that reach of the Cam between Cambridge and Grantchester where Rupert Brooke lived—before my day—and undergraduates go out in punts and talk philosophy. But it might just as well be the Seine, or a bayou, if that is the right word, in the Southern states; and either of those is a more likely source

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of inspiration, because Delius lived on a river in France and possessed a rather mysterious and quite unprofitable farm in Florida.

There is much to be said for having a sort of funeral a year after a man is dead, instead of having it too soon. Some Africans bury their dead with very little ceremony, and then have a much bigger funeral on the anniversary of the death. If we did it like that, the sharp edge of grief would have worn away, and the man's friends could meet to do him honor without creating a public ordeal for the people who loved him best and miss him most. The funeral at Limpsfield was solemn, but it was far from gloomy; in fact, as it turned out, it was a perfect expression of the spirit of the dead man's music. Spring was just turning into summer, and it was one of those days when England, with all its blemishes, is still almost painfully beautiful. Sir Thomas Beecham had brought down a section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and they played the summery music in the church. I suppose nobody but a composer could have quite the same privilege of communicating with his own friends at his own funeral; it was a kind of victory over mortality. Afterwards, by the grave, Sir Thomas gave a funeral oration; and it was then that the blackbird sang. I do not remember what Sir Thomas said, but I am sure it was appropriate. He was a veteran conductor then, and an old friend of Delius', and he had done more than anyone else to bring Delius to the notice of the public; he remained a veteran con-

ductor for another quarter of a century. While he was talking, I turned my microphone a little toward the yew trees. Whatever was said, it was certainly appropriate that a blackbird should sing at that funeral.

But although so many of Delius' friends were there that morning, his wife was not. She had come over from France for the occasion, but on the journey she had caught pneumonia.

I do not think Jelka Delius was a woman who set much store by ceremony, but it was sad that she could not come to that final ceremony at Limpsfield. They had been married for over thirty years. By all accounts, it had been a marriage which had reached heights of great happiness, and survived through depths of tragedy. Jelka was an art student in Paris in the 1890s when they met. He was ten years older than she was, a tall, thin, romantic Englishman of thirty-three, who lived alone without any visible family ties and seemed to her to be aristocratic, although as a matter of fact his father was a wool merchant. She fell in love with him at once; both with him and with his songs, which she sang to his accompaniment. But in those days Delius was a gay and rather feckless person. Jelka was not the only young lady in Paris who had fallen for his charm, and he had no inclination then for married life. So she settled down to wait for him and woo him; and she waited seven years.

Among all the incidents of that long inverted courtship, biographers of Delius emphasize one,



because it had a significance which was hidden when it happened. Soon after they met, she lured him to take her boating on the river in the village of Grez-sur-Loing, which is about forty miles out of Paris, and they landed from their boat in an old deserted garden, enclosed by a church, a ruined castle, and a rambling empty house. She knew the garden was there; she had painted in it several times before. But if it was a stratagem to take him there, it only had a limited success. He was delighted with its atmosphere of ancient peace, and declared that it was the sort of place where he would like to work. But he did not ask her to marry him.

Soon afterwards, the house and its garden were offered for sale. Neither Jelka nor Delius had any money, but she persuaded her mother to buy it; and when they married at last, in 1903, the house and garden became their home, and except in the years of the war they lived there ever after.

When they married, their resources were small, and their prospects were even smaller. Delius had written a respectable quantity of music, but very little of it had been published, and hardly any of his orchestral or operatic work had been performed. But as it happened, he was on the verge of success. It is impossible now to say whether it was through Jelka's influence, or the influence of the tranquil garden, or whether it was simply that a truly original genius will always be recognized in the end; but in the first few years of his marriage, his music began to catch on—first in Germany, where he was hailed as a new German composer, and then in England, where he was hailed with equal pride as English.

For ten years, Delius had many reasons for happiness: success in his art, a beautiful home, a wife who undoubtedly adored him, and good health; and in that period at Grez-sur-Loing he wrote his "Mass of Life" and most of the minor works which are remembered best today. But those were the only ten years of his life when he had so many blessings. In 1914, success deserted him and the income he was earning from royalties disappeared, not through any fault of his own, but because the war had started and music in Europe had practically ceased. For the same reason, he and Jelka had to leave their home and move to London; and as both of them were of German origin and the Germany they knew was the indestructible Germany of music, it must be supposed that the years they lived in London were unhappy.

After the end of the war, before the musical world had come to life again, he was overcome by a personal disaster even more complete. In

1921 he fell ill. For three years, Jelka took him from place to place in Europe in an increasingly desperate search for a doctor who could cure him. Sometimes their hopes were raised; but by 1925, he was totally paralyzed and blind. She took him back to the house at Grez-sur-Loing, knowing that he was incurable and would always be absolutely helpless although his mind remained as clear as ever; and there in the garden where she had taken him when she was first in love, and in the house where his genius had flowered and fame and success had attended him, she nursed him for nine years until he died.

A SUMMER GARDEN

I DID not know any of this history on the day of the funeral, and I do not think I had ever heard of Jelka Delius until somebody, as we left the churchyard, said it was a pity she had been too ill to come. I took my records back to London, and broadcast parts of them in the news, and that was that. But the next day, or the next but one, the telephone on the desk in my office rang three times. Three rings had a special significance in Broadcasting House in that era; they meant that Sir John Reith, the Director General himself, was on the line. The effect on junior members of the staff was as if the Last Trump had sounded; I suppose he meant it to be. He asked me if I had recorded the funeral, and told me to take the records, and something to play them on, to a nursing home in Kensington, because somebody had suggested that Mrs. Delius might like to hear them.

That regal command made no allowance for technical difficulties. Sound recording was a primitive business then, long before tape was invented. We used to record on soft cellulose discs, and the only portable apparatus we had for playing them was a clockwork gramophone which quickly wore them out. Moreover, the recording I had made of the music in the church was far below concert standard; the acoustics of the church had been difficult. So before I set off, I went to the gramophone library and borrowed the commercial records of my own favorite pieces of Delius: "In a Summer Garden," the "First Cuckoo," "Summer Night on the River," and the "Song before Sunrise."

To excuse what I did that day, I must say again that I was young. I was not much over twenty, and young for my age, and I had very little experience of life and none of death; and so I just thought that if Mrs. Delius was ill it might cheer her up to hear some of her hus-

band's music, and I did not think in time that I might be meddling with more profound emotions.

The room in the nursing home was darkened. A woman took me in, and stayed while I was there. I thought she was a friend or a relation of Jelka Delius', not a nurse. I put my gramophone on a table near the bed; and I hardly dared look at the spare, drawn, motionless face on the pillow, because I had understood by then—though I do not think anyone had told me—that she was dying. I played one of the pieces I had recorded in the church, and the words of the service, and then Sir Thomas Beecham's funeral oration. The blackbird could be heard. At the end of his oration, she turned her head toward me where I stood in the half-darkness beside the bed, and she smiled and said: "Dear Tommy." That was the only time she spoke while I was there.

When I had finished, I whispered to the woman who was waiting: "Do you think she would like to hear some music?"

"Yes, I think she would," the woman said; and I put on one of the records I had brought. It was "In a Summer Garden."

Again, I do not know the technical words to describe that piece of music. But there again are all the images I have tried to put into words: love, youth, tranquillity, content; and superimposed on them, the gaiety of bright flowers, birdsong, and sunlight reflected on ripples of running water. The work ends in a shimmering

series of chords so soft and so remote that the music seems almost not to move and not to end, but only to dissolve as trees and flowers dissolve in dusk when night falls on a garden. When the last of those chords was ended, the woman said: "I do not think she can hear any more"; and I looked again at Jelka Delius. Her eyes were closed and she was perfectly still, and I could not read any expression on her face.

I READ in the papers that she was dead; but it was not until many years later that I learned a little more about the music I had played her, and understood how reckless my choice had been. That was after the second war, when orchestral concerts began again in London, and I heard "In a Summer Garden" again at the Albert Hall. Somebody lent me the score, and I saw for the first time the inscription that Delius had written on it. Even now I do not know what emotion I brought to that elderly lady in the last few conscious moments of her life: a happy recollection, or a regret for love and youth long past which is almost unbearable to imagine. "In a Summer Garden" was written soon after Delius married her, before the misery of the war and the agony of his paralysis, and the garden it was written to evoke was their garden at Grez-sur-Loing. At the top of the score, he had written: "To my wife Jelka"; and he had added two lines which are quoted from Rosetti:

All are my blooms, and all sweet blooms of love
To thee I gave while spring and summer sang.

ANNE SEXTON

TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO TRIUMPH

CONSIDER Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,
testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade,
and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn
of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!
There below are the trees, as awkward as camels;
and here are the shocked starlings pumping past
and think of innocent Icarus, who is doing quite well:
larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast
of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!
Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.