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A QUEST FOR INNOCENCE



The Music of Frederick Delius - 1835-1900

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Concentrated into these opening bars are most of the idiomatic elements of Negro music which attracted Delius:

- a. quasi-pentatonic melody; with the exception of
- b. a flattened third, a stylization of the Negroes' 'blue' note (see also ex.7, bar 5);
- c. the melodic progression dom. - submed. - tonic;
- d. 'Scotch snap';
- e. rhythmic ostinati - in this instance Delius seems to have imitated the strumming sound of a plucked banjo or guitar; and
- f. alternating rhythms,  becoming  ;
in his extension of the theme Delius revels in playful syncopations:

Ex.7. 4 bars after fig.4 (strings only),



In common with the earlier dance, this 'Danza' is carried by its rhythmic impulse to a powerful climax. From the second stage of the build-up ('Più animato', fig.5) the rhythmic cells of the first movement are also called into play.

The process of assimilating these characteristics of Negro folk music into his language had already reached an important stage in 1888, a year after Florida, when Delius wrote his Rhapsodische Variationen.³⁹ His first essay in a form in which he would later write several of his finest works is rather half-hearted. Composed in September 1888

39. Unpublished. DT vol.3 (RL p.25).

during a holiday in St.Malo,these variations have in several ways the appearance of an exercise or first draft: the theme is declared immediately in octaves by horn and trumpet,and is not otherwise harmonized or accompanied; all six complete variations remain anchored to the key of E major; there are frequent signs of unchecked work; the longest variation has 46 bars,and the shortest only 16; the work is incomplete, sketches for the 7th variation evaporating after 6 bars. Within these severely restricted parameters of length and tonality,the last thing these variations were likely to be was rhapsodic. It is probable that Delius applies the title in the sense that he uses the theme with considerable licence,in some variations employing it more 'in spirit than in letter'.

The Rhapsodische Variationen are of interest because they show a deliberate attempt by Delius to import a Floridian flavour into an otherwise conventional formal model and abstract context. He chooses to write his variations on a theme into which he has injected elements of the Negro folk idiom:

Ex.8. Rhapsodische Variationen,theme.



The quasi-pentatonic pattern of the melody,and especially the opening progression,are features familiar from Florida.

The degree to which the pentatonic shadings of the melody are allowed to dominate the tiny movements differs from variation to variation.The free manner in which Delius treats his theme is not unconnected with the fact that the melody is - for all its pentatonism - undistinguished and unyielding. However,at those moments when the theme is graced with a lively rhythmic impulsion,the smiling idiom of Florida charms briefly again. In this respect,the shortest movement,variation 3,is the most notable. The theme of this playful dance is in octaves in the four upper strings,while the trombones carry the harmony. And over the music Delius writes the extraordinary,if appropriate,instruction - 'Alla Negra':



The notion of a 'rhapsody' composition embodying impressions of his American experiences - in particular what he considered to be the many contrasts in the Negro character - was to stay with Delius for a decade and a half. In a foreword to the work which represents the culmination of his efforts in this direction, the Appalachia variations (1902-3), Delius writes:

"The composition describes the natural coloring of the distant tropical districts of the powerful Mississippi-River, which is so intimately connected with the fate of the negro-slaves. Longing melancholy, an intense love for nature, as well as the childlike humour and a native delight of dancing and singing are still to the present time the most characteristic qualities of this race."

The America/Negro rhapsody idea seems to have given rise in 1889 (the year after Rhapsodische Variationen) to La Quadroone (Rapsodie Floridienne). This work has unfortunately not survived.⁴⁰ In 1890 the variations experiment was tried out again - in Légendes for solo piano and orchestra.⁴¹ This work, like the Rhapsodische Variationen, exists only in an incomplete draft. One of the variations which is relatively fully worked out employs a pentatonic 'alla Negra' variant of the theme (see p. 123).

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40. For further information on this work, see RT p.128.

41. Unpublished. DT vol.39 (RL p.138-9).

"Ye who love the haunts of Nature
Love the sunshine of the meadow,
Love the shadow of the forest,
Love the wind among the branches,
And the rain-shower and the snow-storm,
And the rushing of great rivers
Through their palisades of pine-trees,
And the thunder in the mountains,
Whose innumerable echoes
Flap like eagles in their eyries;-"

This stirring, open-ended invocation,⁴² extracted from Longfellow's 'Introduction' to his set of poems The Song of Hiawatha (1855), stands on the title-page of Delius's tone poem Hiawatha. Dated January 1888 on the manuscript, the work was probably begun shortly after the completion of the Florida suite, and before the informal performance of the suite mentioned above (see p.15).⁴³

The idiomatic elements Delius uses to achieve ethnic character in the two scores are strikingly similar. Although, in Hiawatha, such alterations and extensions are made to the elements of the earlier score influenced by Negro music that Delius's Negro plantation and Indian reservation are usually distinguishable, these changes are insignificant in comparison with the common ground shared by the works.

On the melodic side it will be recalled that the influence of folk music had been evident in three main ways: in the pentatonic basis of themes and motifs, the frequency of the melodic motif dom. - submed. - tonic, and the occasional colouration of the melody with flattened thirds. The melodies given in Table I (p.25) represent the main thematic content of Hiawatha. It will be seen that themes (a) to (d) derive their melodic character from the predominance of notes in

42. The following two lines of the poem are as follows:

"Listen to these wild traditions,
To this Song of Hiawatha!"

43. Hiawatha is unpublished. DT vol.1 (RL pp.17-19). Unfortunately, some pages of the manuscript have been lost. The composer numbered the pages, so it is possible to assess the extent of the missing material.

Table I Thematic material of Hiawatha

(a) f.1b

Lento, molto tranquillo
V.M.
VIOLA
MOOD
p

Measures 1-4 of the first system. Treble staff: D4 quarter, E4 quarter, F#4 quarter, G4 quarter, A4 quarter, B4 quarter, C5 quarter, D5 quarter. Bass staff: D2 half note with tremolo.

(b) f.5a

(con vigore)
f. cassa

Measures 1-4 of the second system. Treble staff: D4 quarter, E4 quarter, F#4 quarter, G4 quarter, A4 quarter, B4 quarter, C5 quarter, D5 quarter. Bass staff: D2 half note with tremolo.

(c) f.11a

Andante con molto espressione
cassa mp

Measures 1-4 of the third system. Treble staff: D4 quarter, E4 quarter, F#4 quarter, G4 quarter, A4 quarter, B4 quarter, C5 quarter, D5 quarter. Bass staff: D2 half note with tremolo.

(d) f.26a

oboe mp dolce
p. mood

Measures 1-4 of the fourth system. Treble staff: D4 quarter, E4 quarter, F#4 quarter, G4 quarter, A4 quarter, B4 quarter, C5 quarter, D5 quarter. Bass staff: D2 half note with tremolo.

(e) f.17a

Fl. → 8va
p
8va
pizz.
cassa/oboe

Measures 1-4 of the fifth system. Treble staff: D4 quarter, E4 quarter, F#4 quarter, G4 quarter, A4 quarter, B4 quarter, C5 quarter, D5 quarter. Bass staff: D2 half note with tremolo.

pentatonic patterns. The cantilena oboe theme (d) floats down to Delius's common motif, to be echoed by a solo horn. These three notes are repeated in several guises in this section of the tone poem. Most interesting of all is (c), one of the most attractive themes in Delius's early music.⁴⁴ It is confined to the five notes G - A - C - D - E, with one additional Bb. This tone is the common Negro 'blue' note alteration to the seventh. The wide-ranging, eminently vocal melody is like some spontaneous, improvised song Delius might have heard on the evening air at Solana Grove.

On the rhythmic side, the 'Scotch snap' is in evidence also in Hiawatha, as are rhythmic ostinati, both in flowing multiple patterns, as at (a), and in impulsive syncopations, as at (e). The similarities to the dances in Florida do not end with the use of the Calinda rhythm here. As earlier, a climax is achieved in this Indian war dance by degrees, with momentum accumulating from a combination of driving rhythms and the gradual use of quicker note values.

Delius's ethnic Indian writing differs from his Negro music principally in its character. The exuberant, often humorous, music which gives Florida its special charm has given way to more sober themes. In themes (a) and (b) the composer has evoked a sense of grandness and nobility. Theme (a) comes at the opening of the tone poem, where Delius has probably intended a musical depiction of an Indian campfire meeting, with the low chanting of assembled braves represented by the slowly swelling pentatonic melody. Indeed, when he composed the music for just such a scene in his Red Indian opera The Magic Fountain, he hit upon a similarly sustained, brooding pentatonic theme (see p. 225, ex. 1). In keeping with the noble seriousness of his Indians, Delius makes little use of the cross-rhythms which enliven Florida.

44. This theme reappears in the orchestral work Paris, some ten years later (2 bars after fig. 13).

Delius may actually have heard the music of the Indians while in America, since he did have some contact with them:

"Though there were no Red Indians living near Solano, he spoke to several of them in other parts and was struck by their extreme courtesy and good breeding. If left alone, he always declared, the Redskin would be a gentleman."⁴⁵

It is prudent, therefore, to note that there is some historical justification for the common ground in the music of Delius's Indians and Negroes. The ritual music of the many North American tribes varies greatly, but, if Delius had witnessed a performance he might have heard that "[s]cales are most frequently tetratonic, pentatonic or hexatonic".⁴⁶ As well as the modal similarity between Indian and Negro music, both also favour continuous percussive rhythms in accompaniment to their singing. Beyond this point, however, Delius's stylizations can not be said to bear any relation to traditional Indian music, lacking its characteristic descending melodic contour, primitive simplicity, and monophony. The syncopation of the dance section in Hiawatha is essentially dissimilar to the equispaced rhythmic formulae universally employed by Indian tribes.

In other words, in his Indian music Delius was probably much more dependent on the popular idea of what constituted the ethnic idiom than he was in his Negro music, and, indeed, thought it valid to extend his stylized Negro features to Hiawatha. In doing so, and masking them in Indian nobility, he doesn't fail to create a sense of ethnic colour. But it is much more in keeping with a stereotypical image of Indian culture (probably that of popular literature and music-hall parody) than with the historical reality.

Although his musical characterizations of the Indian and the Negro are technically very similar, the fact that Delius had a personal relationship with one of the groups and not the other gains in importance in his career. Delius's

45. Clare Delius, op.cit., pp.72-3.

46. Bruno Nettl and Gertrude Prokosch: entry on Indian music in The New Grove Dictionary of Music (London, 1980), vol.13, p.298.

version of the Indian, based on character stereotype and drawn from a 'pool' of ethnic musical formulae, had little potential for development. His attempt to write an opera based on Indian life would prove only partly successful. The Indians play, in the end, only a subsidiary part in The Magic Fountain and their characterization often approaches the border line with parody. (It is in The Magic Fountain, incidentally, that the small differences Delius had made in delineating Negro and Indian actually vanish. An Indian war dance in Act II reaches its culmination when Delius transfers to it, of all things, part of the 'Danza' - the "noisy nigger dance" - of the Florida suite).

Delius's personal understanding of, sympathies with and admiration for the Negroes were, on the other hand, to have a very positive influence on his creative development. He attempted to emulate and assimilate the musical style he had heard, both its folk charm and exotic harmonic procedures. The depth and range of the Negro personality, with which he considered himself intimately acquainted, was the subject of two orchestral works and an opera later in his development period.

The full effect of this influence would only slowly become evident. That Delius, already in his earliest scores, had achieved an eminently workable synthesis of Negro and European music may, therefore, seem surprising. It is probable, however, that Delius was enamoured of the folk-simplicity of Negro music before he arrived in Florida. Just like the Indian, the Negro was a stock music-hall character. As a child Delius had enjoyed imitating the shows given by touring companies of American and American-styled minstrels. Though Negro caricature was their trademark, these shows did trace their heritage back to the Southern plantations. (It was a heritage derived more from idiosyncrasies of dialect and behaviour than musical traditions, for the actual musical content of the minstrel show was based on the forms and styles of the nineteenth century drawing-room ballad and music-hall

song).⁴⁷ Delius would also have been familiar with the folk music of Scotland and Ireland, which shared with Afro-American music not only pentatonic melody and the 'Scotch snap', but also an underlying tendency towards wistfulness. This would partly account for the fact that, once Delius had accepted the challenge in his Leipzig period of combining ethnic colour and a European technique, he revealed a striking facility in adapting exotic music to his own needs.

That the fiction of Negro parody disposed Delius favourably to Negroes in advance, does not invalidate the overawing experience of the Negro reality at Solana Grove. Delius was profoundly affected. Pentatonic colouration and other Negro music traits became, therefore, genuine means of self-expression; they reflected fundamental sympathies. Works by Delius influenced by Negro music never suggest minstrelsy.

The beauty inherent in Delius's synthesis is well illustrated by the fluid $\frac{1}{2}$ section which follows the dance in Hiawatha. The thematic material and accompanying string arabesques are tinted with pentatonic colour - enough to lend this most ornate passage of Delius's early career an air of artless innocence (ex.10, p.30).

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The period Delius spent at Solana Grove, it was noted above, has commonly been regarded in a highly romantic light - it was then that the composer, through contact with the Exotic and Primitive, is supposed to have had a moment of illumination, an artistic ecstasy. Delius established this image of his experiences there in the nostalgic reminiscences he was increasingly given to voicing in his later years. It has since been enlarged upon by those commentators whose criticism has perhaps tended towards the sensational or sentimental.

47. Surveys of the history of minstrelsy can be found in Dailey Paskman: Gentlemen, Be Seated! (New York, 1976), and Richard Jackson (ed.): Popular Songs of Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1976).

Ex.10. Hiawatha, copyists MS corresponding to
f.27a (bar 4) - f.27b (bar 3) of original MS.

Handwritten musical score for Ex.10, Hiawatha. The score is arranged in a system of staves, with the following instruments and parts labeled on the left:

- FL.
- 2/3 FL.
- OB.
- CLAR.
- BASS.
- 1/2 HARP.
- 1/6 HARP.
- TRIO.
- 2 TRIO.
- TRIO / TUBA.
- HARP.
- V. 1.
- V. 2.
- VLA.
- CELLO.
- BASS.

The score is written in a system of staves, with the first three staves (FL., 2/3 FL., OB.) grouped together. The notation includes various musical symbols, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *pp* and *ppp*. The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines.