

Celebrate Delius
Program Notes
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By Joseph Horowitz

Two major European composers were so smitten by American plantation song that their own music was instantly stamped by “Negro melodies.” One – as many Americans know – was Antonin Dvorak. The other – much less well-known to us -- was Frederick Delius. Born in England in 1862 to German parents, Delius was sent by his father to Florida to manage an orange grove at the age of 22. He showed no skill in that department. But he did encounter in Thomas Ward, an organist from Brooklyn, a formidable musical mentor. And the songs of the plantation workers that he heard were an epiphany in which he discovered “at truly wonderful sense of musicianship and harmonic resource.” Hearing this singing “in such romantic surroundings,” he later told his disciple Eric Fenby, “I first felt the urge to express myself in music.” A few years later, after Delius had resettled in Danville, Virginia, as a fledgling musician, his father finally agreed to allow him to study composition formally – in Leipzig.

Dvorak came late to plantation song – its overt impact on his musical speech was potent but mainly temporary. For Delius, the encounter was early and formative. At least four Delius compositions explicitly evoke the sounds of the American South: the *Florida Suite* (1887, revised 1889), the operas *The Magic Fountain* (1895) and *Koanga* (1897), and the present *Appalachia* (1898-1903). It is music on the cusp of Delius’s mature chromatic idiom, which translates the harmonic world of late Wagner into a voice unlike any other. If this is rarified, so is its central application: the expression of loss of self in rapturous, solitary communion with Nature. (The intense eccentricity of Delius the man is unforgettably conveyed in the greatest of all film portraits of a composer: Ken Russell’s *Song of Summer*)

Appalachia is Delius’s *New World* Symphony, composed less than a decade after Dvorak’s. The title does not denote the Carolina region, but appropriates a Native American word for the whole of North America. The pacing of this 40-minute sequence of “variations on an old slave song with final chorus” is leisurely and expansive. Coming first is a preamble: an epic sunrise on virgin terrain. For Dvorak, the vast unpopulated American prairie inspired feelings melancholy and existential; for Delius, the American landscape here revealed by the dawning light is both physical and metaphysical: untrammelled, life-affirming. We next hear the first stirrings of nature, then the bustle of human life rising to a high pitch of elation; the orchestra fairly shouts “America!” Then the “old slave song” is sung – as in Dvorak’s *Largo* – by a solo English horn.

Fourteen variations follow. For variations 6, 8, 9, and 10, the chorus enters as a murmured pendant. This *pianissimo* echo remembers Delius’s first enthralled discovery, from the veranda of his Florida home, of the distant voices of black plantation hands, a siren call floating across the water. A central series of slow variations comprises the work’s most hypnotically “Delian” episode: of forms half-seen, half-imagined in the hazy heat. Only with the penultimate variation does the chorus deliver, a cappella, the “old slave song” (whose provenance has never been traced). It redescribes the sunrise with which the work began:

After night has gone comes the day,
The dark shadows will fade away,

For the finale, a solo baritone joins the singers to clinch the imagery of ecstatic daybreak. The work's final pages – sunset – echo the strains of its refulgent beginning.

Solitude and sorrow, nostalgia and rapturous illumination would define Delius's musical expression as he receded into a realm of pure experience, remote from the world. The potency of plantation song as a starting point for this singular compositional odyssey remains ponderable. Has any American drawn such fresh breath directly from the "Negro melodies" of the South as did Dvorak and Delius, coming upon them unawares a century ago?

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In later life, Delius absorbed a further American influence in the nature mysticism of Walt Whitman – and in 1904 (just after *Appalachia*) composed among the most telling of all the many musical settings of Whitman's verse: *Sea Drift*, for baritone, chorus, and orchestra. To Eric Fenby, Delius confided: "The shape of it was taken out of my hands . . . and was bred easily of my particular musical ideas, and the nature and sequence of the particular poetical ideas of Whitman that appealed to me." The outcome is considered by many Delius's masterpiece.

Whitman's poem, from *Leaves of Grass*, begins with the poet observing mated birds – and the sudden disappearance of the female, no longer daily tending her nest. The he-bird's bewildered loss transmutes into human loss. The poet imagines the voice of his beloved – "This gentle call is for you" – only to be disabused by the commenting chorus. The permanence of loss erases cherished memories: "O darkness! O in vain!"

Whitman's imagery is of love, death, and the sea – and a tidal ebb and flow informs Delius' setting. Though solo woodwinds evoke birdsong, and a solo harp the glitter of stars, the nature music of *Sea Drift* is wondrously interior. Its high arc peaks with the ecstasy of apotheosis, then descends to plumb the heartbreak of personal pain. Identifying with the grieving bird, the human sings: "Yes, my brother, I know," a passage ushering distant memories of childhood – and also a distinct memory of plantation song, wafted from a Florida orange grove long, long ago.

To learn more about the music, please attend the Pre-Concert Conversations one hour before each Masterworks concert.