

Celebrate Delius
Program Notes
January 6 - 8, 2012
By Richard Rodda

“Goethe’s poems exert a great power over me not only because of their contents but also because of their rhythms; I am stimulated to compose by this language, which builds itself up to higher orders as if through spiritual agencies, and bears in itself the secret of harmonies.” Thus did Beethoven explain the inspiration he derived from the words and thoughts of the great German writer to his friend Bettina von Arnim. Almost a quarter of Beethoven’s eighty songs are based on poems by Goethe, and in 1810, he contributed an imposing Overture and several pieces of incidental music to a revival of *Egmont* for the reopening of the Vienna Hoftheater after the lifting of the city’s occupation by French forces the year before. Beethoven met Goethe at Teplitz during the summer of 1812, and three years later composed a choral work on his paired poems titled *Meeresstille und Glückliche Fahrt* (“*Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*”). (Mendelssohn’s concert overture on the same subject dates from 1828.) The composition was first presented, under the composer’s direction, at a concert on Christmas Day 1815 in the Redoutensaal in Vienna to benefit the city’s hospital fund. When the score was published in 1822, Beethoven sent a copy to the poet inscribed with the dedication, “To the immortal Goethe.” Goethe noted in his diary that he had “received a score from Beethoven,” but never replied. The composer, somewhat miffed at this lack of response, sent the following letter to Goethe in February 1823:

“Still living as I have lived from my youthful years in your immortal, never-aging words, and never forgetting the happy hours spent in your company, it nevertheless happens that I must recall myself to your recollection. I hope that you received the dedication to Your Excellency of *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, composed by me. Because of their contrast, both poems seemed to me adapted for expression in music; how gladly would I know whether I have fittingly united my harmonies with yours.... How highly would I value some general observations from you on the composition or setting to music of your poems! ... The respect, love and esteem which I have cherished for the only and immortal Goethe since the days of my youth have remained with me. Feelings like this are not easily put into words, especially by a bungler like myself, who has always been bent only on making tones of his own. But a singular feeling impels me to tell you this, inasmuch as I live in your works. A few words from you would fill me with happiness. I remain, Your Excellency, with the sincerest and most unbounded respect, Beethoven.” Goethe, then 73, was ill at the time, and a recuperative stay at Marienbad during the summer precluded an answer to Beethoven’s letter. The dedication of *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* was never acknowledged.

In his biography of the composer, Maynard Solomon wrote that *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* is “a small masterpiece of tone painting, which treats one of Beethoven’s favorite subjects — tranquility penetrated by agitation, dissolving into joyful triumph.” The first of the work’s two large paragraphs sets Goethe’s apprehensive words about a ship becalmed at sea, a troubling condition that not only disrupted trade in those days of the masted sailing ships, but could even mean starvation for the crew if it lasted long enough. This first section is quiet, almost motionless, except for two startling exclamations of terror

from the chorus. The tension of the opening music is dispelled by the composition's second section, whose rolling gusts of triplets and joyous choral shouts blow the sailors safely to port.

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In 1899, after a failed attempt to run an orange grove in Florida, stints as a music teacher in Virginia and an organist in New York, and a musical apprenticeship at the Leipzig Conservatory, Frederick Delius used an inheritance from his father (a well-to-do German-born merchant who made his fortune in wool in Manchester) to abandon his native England and settle in France. In Leipzig, Delius met Edvard Grieg, with whom he became fast friends and regularly passed his summer holidays in Norway, and Jelka Rosen, a gifted German painter whom he married. Delius and his bride established their home in the village of Grez-sur-Loing, some distance south of Paris, where Jelka's family had enjoyed a number of vacations in earlier years. Delius largely shut himself off from the world thereafter, living in the comfort provided by his wife's substantial inheritance, and writing in short order four of his greatest compositions: *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, *Appalachia*, *A Mass of Life* and *Sea Drift*. *Sea Drift*, composed at Grez in 1903, was spawned by Delius' love of the poetry of Walt Whitman, whose verses enjoyed great popularity in turn-of-the-century England and also inspired compositions from Vaughan Williams (*Sea Symphony*, *Toward the Unknown Region*), Holst (*Ode to Death*) and Harty (*The Mystic Trumpeter*). At the end of his life, Delius returned to Whitman's poetry for his *Songs of Farewell* (1930) and *Idyll: Once I Passed Through a Populous City* (1932). *Sea Drift* was premiered at a music festival in Essen, Germany in July 1906, and helped Delius establish a reputation in that country which briefly rivaled that of Richard Strauss. It was among the first of Delius' works to make an impression in his native England, when Sir Henry Wood conducted it at the Sheffield Festival in 1908.

Sea Drift takes as its text a passage from Whitman's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* from *Leaves of Grass*, which tells of a lonely boy's observation of, and reaction to, two mating sea-birds and their sundering. Though the poem is filled with images of the sea, Delius tried less to paint a realistic seascape than to evoke the feelings of the young narrator and to place his personal experience into a universal context. The composer himself indicated some of the elevated, inspired quality of *Sea Drift* when he described its creation to his amanuensis and biographer Eric Fenby: "*Sea Drift*, I think, is one of my best works. The shape of it was taken out of my hands, so to speak, as I worked, and was bred easily and effortlessly of the nature and sequence of my particular musical ideas, and the nature and sequence of the particular poetical ideas of Whitman that appealed to me." In his recent study of the composer, Christopher Palmer wrote of *Sea Drift*, "Delius is a visionary and a mystic, happy like Whitman to view the sea as the symbol of man's spiritual odyssey into the unknown.... The sea, like all natural phenomena in Delius, shows both intense involvement in and sovereign indifference to human destiny, embracing alike the Eden of innocence and the anguish of love; symbol finally of that Nirvana in which artists, lovers and mystics throughout the ages have sought consummatory release. Delius, attuned as he was in sublime harmony with the universe, is their supreme poet-spokesman in sound."

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"The worst businessman since the invention of money" is Harold Schonberg's description of Frederick

Delius' early ventures in his father's wool merchant in Bradford, England. The young man's delicate spirit and artistic inclination elicited little sympathy in his tyrannical father, and a break between them was inevitable. (An older sibling had already fled to a sheep ranch in New Zealand.) Through the Land Mortgage Bank of Florida, which maintained a London office in Whitehall and a branch in Bradford, the Deliuses learned of an orange grove some thirty miles up the St. John's River from Jacksonville that was available, and Papa, seeking to thwart his son's dream of a career as a musician, took out a lease with an option to buy on the land, and put Frederick in charge of overseeing its operation. Frederick ("demoralized," he said of himself) left England early in March 1884 aboard the Cunard liner *Gallia*, and arrived at the plantation, known as Solana Grove, some three weeks later.

Delius hired a few hands, but made little further attempt at working Solana Grove. Instead he used the isolation provided by the many acres of semi-tropical forest and the river to dream and think and discover. "In Florida, through sitting and gazing at Nature, I gradually learnt the way in which I should eventually find myself," he wrote. "It was," according to his sister, Clare, "an ideal situation for Fred." Though his contacts with musicians during his eighteen months in Florida were few, they were significant. On a piano-buying trip to Jacksonville (three days by boat from Solana Grove), he met one Thomas F. Ward, a well-trained musician and the organist at the local Roman Catholic Church, who had been ordered to leave New York City for Florida to cure his consumption. The two men became close friends, and Delius said that he learned more about music from Ward than he ever learned from anyone else. A wholly different sort of musician was Elbert Anderson, the Negro overseer of Solana Grove. Delius seems to have spent a good deal of time with him, improvising for him on the piano and violin in return for which Anderson played the banjo and sang slave songs and spirituals that captivated the Englishman. For recreation, they went alligator shooting. Throughout his life, Delius retained his love of the music of Black America. Eric Fenby, the amanuensis of the composer in his last years, told of Delius' delight in listening to phonograph records of Afro-American songs: "They gave him great pleasure, for the singing was reminiscent of the way his Negroes used to sing in Florida, when as a young orange-planter he had often sat up far into the night, smoking cigar after cigar, and listening to their subtle improvisations in harmony. 'They showed a truly wonderful sense of musicianship and harmonic resource in the instinctive way in which they treated a melody,' Delius used to say, 'and, hearing their singing in such romantic surroundings, it was then and there that I first felt the impulse to express myself'." It was from this music that Delius conceived the idea for what became, many years after he left Florida, *Appalachia, Variations on an Old Slave Song*.

In 1888, after spending several months as a music teacher in Danville, Virginia, meeting Grieg in Norway, and studying at the Leipzig Conservatory, Delius settled in Grez-sur-Loing, near Paris, where he lived for the rest of his life. There he began *Appalachia* in 1896, though its jaunty original version differed markedly from the thoughtful and moving one known today in that it included liberal doses of *Dixie* and *Yankee-Doodle* along with the slave songs of Florida. Delius worked until 1902 on the score, which was premiered in Elberfeld, Germany two years later, during a surge of interest in his music in that country before World War I. (Anti-English sentiment curtailed performances of his music in Germany after 1914.) "I never dreamed that anybody but myself was writing such good music," allowed Richard Strauss with typical immodesty. Busoni was so overwhelmed by a 1906 performance of *Appalachia* in Berlin that he burst into tears upon meeting the composer after the concert.

“‘Appalachia’ is the old Indian name for North America,” wrote Delius in his preface to the score. “This composition mirrors the moods of tropical Nature in the great swamps bordering on the Mississippi River, which is so intimately associated with the life of the old Negro slave population. [The songs exhibit] longing melancholy, an intense love for Nature, childlike humor, and an innate delight in dancing and singing.” *Appalachia* is a set of variations based on the hymnal song, *After night has gone comes the day* (which bears a striking resemblance to the theme of the Act III quartet in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*), which is first heard in the English horn after a long, atmospheric introduction said to represent the great Mississippi. The variations are orchestral, with tiny, wordless halos from the chorus hovering above the closing measures of several sections. Near the end of the work, the unaccompanied chorus gives a wonderfully sweet rendition of the entire tune, and is called forth again, with the baritone soloist, to conclude *Appalachia* with another slave melody, *O Honey, I am going down the river in the morning*. The texts express the sadness and hope of the slaves, who could be moved between plantations at the whim of the owner and separated by many miles from their wives and children. In *Appalachia*, Delius, “the composer-poet *par excellence* of regret for time past, and of the transience of human love,” wrote Michael Kennedy, caught perfectly the mood of the words and their singers in music of surpassing beauty and rich emotion.

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Soon after the United States entered World War II, André Kostelanetz asked three American composers to write works that would convey “the magnificent spirit of our country.” He felt that “the greatness of a nation is expressed through its people, and those people who have achieved greatness are the logical subjects for a series of musical portraits. The qualities of courage, dignity, strength, simplicity and humor which are so characteristic of the American people are well represented in [our leaders].” Following Kostelanetz’s request, Virgil Thomson composed the *Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia Waltzes* and Jerome Kern the *Portrait for Orchestra of Mark Twain*. Aaron Copland was the third composer approached by Kostelanetz, and he provided the following information about the composition and nature of the *Lincoln Portrait*:

“It was in January 1942 that André Kostelanetz suggested the idea of my writing a musical portrait of a great American. He put teeth into the proposal by offering to commission such a piece and to play it extensively. My first thought was to do a portrait of Walt Whitman, the patron poet of all American composers. But when Mr. Kostelanetz explained that the series of portraits already included a literary figure, I was persuaded to change to a statesman. From that moment on the choice of Lincoln as my subject seemed inevitable.

“On discussing my choice with Virgil Thomson, he amiably pointed out that no composer could possibly hope to match in musical terms the stature of so eminent a figure as that of Lincoln. Of course, he was quite right. But the sinner himself might speak. With the voice of Lincoln to help me I was ready to risk the impossible.

“The letters and speeches of Lincoln supplied the text. It was a comparatively simple matter to choose a few excerpts that seemed particularly apposite to our [wartime] situation. I avoided the temptation to use only well-known passages, permitting myself the luxury of quoting only once from a world-famous

speech. The order and arrangement of the selections are my own.

“The first sketches were made in February and the portrait finished on April 16, 1942. The orchestration was completed a few weeks later. I worked with musical materials of my own, with the exception of two songs of the period: the famous *Camptown Races* and a ballad that was first published in 1840 under the title of *The Pesky Sarpent*, but is better known today as *Springfield Mountain*. In neither case is the treatment a literal one. The tunes are used freely in the manner of my use of cowboy songs in *Billy the Kid*.

“The composition is roughly divided into three main sections. In the opening section, I wanted to suggest something of the mysterious sense of fatality that surrounds Lincoln’s personality. Also, near the end of that section, something of his greatness and simplicity of spirit. [*Springfield Mountain* is the thematic basis of this portion.] The quick middle section briefly sketches in the background of the times during which he lived. [Fragments of Stephen Foster’s *Camptown Races* figure prominently in this passage.] This merges into the concluding section, where my sole purpose was to draw a simple but impressive frame around the words of Lincoln.”

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