

DELIUS SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

NEWSLETTER
of the
DELIUS SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

"Fennimore and Gerda" was given its first stage production in Great Britain nearly eighteen months ago and this edition of the Newsletter contains a retrospective survey of the criticisms which appeared in the press. Mr. Redwood (the author of the excellent programme note) wrote his account shortly after attending both performances, but his text was mislaid and has only recently been re-discovered, together with the other material I have included. Your attention is also drawn to the following articles:-

"Fennimore & Gerda"	Christopher Redwood.	('Composer' No. 27 - Spring 1968)
"Jacobsen and Delius: a novel and its opera"	W. Glyn Jones.	(Denmark' No. 146 - Winter 1968, Published by the Anglo-Danish Society, 5 St. Helen's Place, London E.C.3.)

(Many members will remember the absorbing talk given by Dr. Glyn Jones on the subject at a previous London meeting.)

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Miss Palmley has sent me a letter she has received from Mr. Ivor Hughes, the Artistic Director of 'Yorkshire Opera', from which I quote the following:

"You will be very interested to know that I have been staging an Exhibition in various parts of Yorkshire about my struggles and the project in general. Delius had to be included, and I not only have a large photo copy of the Gunn portrait in Bradford, but also the B.B.C. let me have stills from Ken Russell's excellent T.V. film, and I commissioned two young stage designers to design two of the operas. Mark Haddon did costumes and a set for 'Koanga', and Franco Collavechia designed 'Fennimore'.

"I have also recently staged a Prize Song Contest, which achieved nation-wide response from singers, both amateur and professional, and which I shall repeat next year. There was a 'Delius' prize, given by Boosey and Hawkes Ltd., for the best operatic voice, and also the Eric Fenby prize for the best mezzo or contralto. Only one singer sang anything by Delius, out of the 200 odd singers who took part, and that was 'Twilight Fancies'. There was no stipulation they should do so, not even in the 'Delius' prize."

Mr. Hughes remarks that support is increasing, but it will be some time before a Delius opera can be staged.

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Miss Palmley also asked me to mention that the next London meeting will be held at Holborn Library, Theobalds Road, on Friday, 28th November, at 7.30p.m. I shall be giving a talk on "Appalachia" during which the work will be analysed.

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"FENNIMORE AND GERDA" - A POSTSCRIPT

by Christopher W. Redwood.

The long-anticipated British premiere of "Fennimore and Gerda" has come and gone, and the event now seems far enough away for us to begin to think about writing a verdict on it in our musical history books. The purpose of this article is not to add just one more critique - too many people have done that already, and by no means all of them qualified to do so, as I shall remark later - but to examine the event in retrospect and compare the ways in which it was received in various quarters. Those who saw the production are asked to forgive my stressing certain points that they may consider to be obvious, and bear in mind that probably the most interested readers of this newsletter are the ones who were unable to attend.

The first point that I wish to consider is the amount of advance publicity that the production received. Now, although the promised Delius revival has still not arrived,* I think that most English music-lovers would include Delius in their list of the top half-dozen English composers (although this task is not nearly so easy as it sounds - you try it!) One would have thought, therefore, that the announcement of the British premiere of an opera composed during the decade which is generally agreed to be that of the composer's most fruitful compositions, would have been a red-letter day in the English musical calendar. Instead, barely a word was written about the production before it took place. The article which I wrote in 'The Composer' had previously been returned to me by the Editor of 'Opera' with the comment: "we are not proposing to run an article on this particular production". Am I being over optimistic in thinking that a journal with so precise a title, published in a country which is supposed to be taking an increased pride in its own national music, was making a serious omission here? Or does 'Opera' cater more for the fascists who would rather read of the antics of a Franco-Prussian soprano singing in an Italian opera in South America than in what is happening on their own doorsteps? One cannot help remembering a couple of years ago when the obscure opera 'Raymond and Agnes' by Edward Loder was produced at Cambridge. A month ahead of the production every important musical journal carried a long article about it, and the 'Musical Times' even gave over its cover design to the subject. One is inclined to ask - "what has Loder got that Delius hasn't?"

* Mr. Redwood has sent me the following footnote: "I wrote this article before the recent Delius film and the wave of interest which followed it. I would like to be able to think that the words are no longer applicable."

(The probable answer to this question is that Clare College, Cambridge, who sponsored the Loder opera, have far more money and influence than the Metropolitan Borough of Hammersmith. Nevertheless, with the Delius Trust behind them, they should have been able to steal more advance publicity than they did.)

Having been so scathing with the musical journals for their advance notices - or rather the lack of them - I must now answer the question: had they given it more attention, would the subsequent production have warranted it?

For the benefit of those who were unable to attend, I should explain that Basil and Elroy Ashmore (producer and designer respectively) had devised a most economical setting, in which a minimum of outline scenery was seen against a sky-blue cyclorama. This was a good idea, and completely in accordance with the composer's wishes.

"-----Realism on the stage is nonsense, and all the scenery necessary is an impressionistic painted curtain at the back, with the fewest accessories possible."

However, even the small bulk of scenery that there was took too long to get on and off the stage at Hammersmith, and long pauses between the scenes were often only rewarded by the curtain rising on a scene that appeared to be much the same as the last. In addition to these pauses, there were two long intervals. This is contrary to the composer's express intentions:

"-----Ninety minutes to two hours is long enough for any opera, and by reducing intervals, as I have done in my work, to three minutes instead of the usual half-hour necessitated by ponderous realistic decoration, this limit can be easily preserved.-----"

Not surprisingly, most of the critics seized on this point. To quote one of the more perceptive of them, Ronald Crichton of "The Financial Times":

"----- (the opera) was a rash choice for a Town Hall with a stage the size of a 'bus ticket and a curtain not nearly thick or heavy enough to absorb the inevitable noise of scene shifting. So noise there was, and too many intervals, --- and delays to break the mood."

This brings me on to the subject of what the critics wrote about the opera. I find it amazing as I read their comments again, to see the disparity of their opinions. Take, for instance, the orchestral playing. This is what some of them thought of it:

"--- imprecise and weak in rhythm ---"

(The Times)

"--- rather tame-----"

(The Observer)

"--- had moments of eloquence but could not summon the confidence or finesse to make the best of the score. There were moments of drowsiness, others of fumbling."

(The Financial Times)

"(the orchestra) seldom caught the fragile sweetness
of the score." (Music & Musicians)
"(the orchestra) was allowed too much prominence---"
(The Musical Times)

On the other hand, some writers seem to have heard differently:

"Chorus and orchestra did well, and Joseph Vandernoot
conducted with quiet command and good feeling." (Opera)
"(the music was) sensitively realised-----" (The Sunday Times)
"The Fulham Municipal Orchestra gave us very much
of the beauty of this wonderfully rich score,
even though we missed the soft transparency
that a first-rate professional orchestra could
bring to the music, and Joseph Vandernoot showed
strong and true instinct for the overall sounds
of the orchestration, and the pace at which the
music must move, lingering yet never stagnating." (The Guardian)
"---there is a wealth of typically haunting Delian sounds,
well brought out by conductor Joseph Vandernoot." (The Evening News)

Now one can quite understand each critic having his own ideas as to interpretation, but when it comes to such a question as the quality of the orchestra's playing, there are no two ways about it. Either it was good, mediocre, or bad. I would be interested to hear how the critics themselves account for this divergence of opinions.

I am afraid this is typical of the way Delius performances are all too often dealt with by the Press, and seems to boil down to a question of whether the particular writer is a pro-Delian or an anti-Delian. Take, for instance, this scathing comment which appeared in 'The Sunday Telegraph'. After referring to Beecham's unfavourable dictum on the opera (what a disservice the old master did for the work that was dedicated to him!), the writer went on:

"---Delius' lack of dramatic feeling, or indeed any feeling towards his characters except as stimuli for his own sense of lost happiness, means that actions continue vaguely on the stage while in the orchestra the harmonies slither and the melodies droop in an interminable decline."

Now, an anti-Delian could (and frequently does) find something like this to say about any Delius composition. The comments are entirely destructive (as opposed to constructive) and consequently worthless as criticism. What they do show is that the writer was prejudiced against the composer before he went to the performance, and he should have had the courage to tell his Editor so. It is of interest to compare this gentleman's comments with those of another who admits to not being fond of Delius' music, Stanley Sadie. He opened his critique in 'The Times':

"It is all too easy to say what is wrong with Delius' opera 'Fennimore and Gerda'; an undramatic idiom, flat characterization, a want of variety in texture, harmony, and pace, a theatrically inconvenient length ---. It is easier still to be deceived by all this into overlooking its merits, which are great and real."

Incidentally, the composer's alleged lack of a sense of drama crops up several times, and I find it surprising to find writers complaining of the fact that most of the action is in the orchestra. Surely this is the same in the operas of Wagner and Debussy, and was intended by all three composers?

Of the merits of the principal singers, the papers seemed to be in somewhat better agreement. Most of them liked the two men singers, some thinking that Jack Irons (Erik) was slightly the better, while about an equal number felt that Robert Bateman (Niels) had the edge over him. It was fairly generally held that the Fennimore (Carolyn Maia) was the weakest of the trio. Another sound point made by Ronald Crichton in 'The Financial Times' was:

"The singers, mostly young and good looking, could hardly be expected to have the experience to project Delius' often ungrateful vocal lines with the art they require."

I understand that at the auditions the producer had insisted that the performers fitted their parts visually as well as vocally. Perhaps it might have been a better idea to have chosen more experienced singers who were still sufficiently young in appearance to be made to look adequate in their roles. After all, Sadler's Wells managed it for "A Village Romeo and Juliet".

But the comment that concerns us most is the verdict on the production as a whole. As usual, there was a sharp divergence of opinion. Some were favourable:

"It is ----- an exquisite work musically, and as this (production) proved, it is also an opera eminently suited to the intimate theatre."
(The Daily Telegraph)

"--- could staging ever add much to this beautiful music?" (The Guardian)

and some patronising:-

"Notwithstanding the weakness of the drama and the flatness of the dialogue, (Delius) has to a surprising degree achieved (his) end. --- the sheer quality of the music largely silences our rational objections." (The Sunday Times)

"As usual, Delius brings off one or two enchanting miniatures." (The Observer)

"--- it is tolerably heard once ---" (Opera)

The two moments which were selected for particular praise were the tenor solo over the water, and the central love-duet. Probably the fairest summary of all was that of Winton Dean, writing in 'The Musical Times':

"Such an opera needs a superb performance to make an effect other than soporific, and this it did not receive."

Personally, I saw and enjoyed both performances, and thought them very creditably handled, but I am wholly in agreement with Mr. Dean. I understand that the Yorkshire Opera Company is still planning to produce this opera in the near future.* Let us hope that they will learn from the mistakes made at Hammersmith. I have my weekend case packed ready!

(* but see Editorial, foot of page 2. - Editor).

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THREE CRITICAL REACTIONS

Daily Telegraph: "Fennimore and Gerda" an exquisite opera.

While an opera of genius like Delius' "A Village Romeo and Juliet" languishes in comparative neglect, it is not surprising that the same composer's 'Fennimore and Gerda' had to wait until last night for its British stage premiere at Fulham Old Town Hall.

Forsaking the rarified atmosphere of the earlier work, with its panoramic scene painting, expansive emotion and romantic innocence, its social realism is couched in the composer's late-middle period style, autumnal but concise.

The sexuality of the central love duet is typical in its short but violent bursts of passion.

It is, as anyone who heard the centenary broadcast knows, an exquisite work musically, and as this beautifully dressed and most fluent production by Basil Ashmore proved, it is also an opera eminently suited to the intimate theatre.

The main performers, Jack Irons and Robert Bateman as Erik and Niels, and Carolyn Maia and Audrey Attwood as the heroines, all played excellently, though only Mr. Irons seemed vocally entirely satisfactory The sets by Elroy Ashmore, both here (in the Holst) and in the suggestive economy of the Delius, were fine. The Fulham Municipal Orchestra was conducted by Joseph Vandernoot.

(A.E.P.)

Sunday Telegraph: John Warrack

Not even Beecham could find much to say in favour of Delius' "Fennimore and Gerda", which had its British premiere (some 60 years after composition) from the Hammersmith Municipal Opera at Fulham Town Hall last Thursday. Evidently Delius hoped that the meandering plot, set out in short scenes mostly depicting the impermanence of or elusiveness of love, would be adequately matched with short tone-poems with vocal lines.

In the spurious happy ending with Gerda there is some agreeable pastoral music, familiar from the Beecham-arranged "Intermezzo"; but Delius' lack of dramatic feeling, or indeed of any feeling towards his characters except as stimuli for his own sense of lost happiness, means that actions continue vaguely on the stage while in the orchestra the harmonies slither and the melodies droop in an interminable decline.

For all its slenderness, there is more invention, more understanding of music as a dramatic medium in Holst's contemporaneous Savitri which preceded the Delius. Joseph Vandernoot conducted; Basil Ashmore produced.

Sunday Times: "Delius: pale fire" Desmond Shawe-Taylor.

Like the rest of us, composers behave in a very rum way from time to time; and they are apt to show themselves at their most eccentric and impractical when seized with the idea for a new opera. Some detail or other, a single scene or a single character, catches their fancy, and they plunge into a task that sober consideration would have shown to be theatrically hopeless.

So it was with Delius, whose last opera, "Fennimore and Gerda" composed at the height of his powers in 1908-10, received its English stage premiere on Thursday at Fulham Old Town Hall: so far as I know, its only previous staging was at Frankfurt in 1919. Where or not J.B. Jacobsen's novel, "Niels Lyhne", contained operatic possibilities, Delius had no notion how to extract them.

Ninety per cent of those who have given a passing thought to the matter probably assume that 'Fennimore and Gerda' are a pair of lovers. Not at all: they are two women in the love-life of Niels Lynhe, a dreamy young poet who eventually settles down to farm. Well, then, an Aida and Amnaris of the fjords? By no means: the two ladies are not acquainted.

Nine of the eleven 'pictures' into which Delius cast his ninety-minute opera do indeed deal with a more ordinary type of triangular situation - in which, as it oddly happens, all three parties are cousins. Fennimore marries the superficial Erik, who loses confidence in his painting and, plunging into mild Norwegian

debaucheries, meets his end in an accident just when Fennimore, realising her mistake, has confessed her love for Niels: in the subsequent shock and revulsion she sends her true lover away for ever. A four-minute interval and three years now elapse, Niels, resigned and relatively happy on his farm, proposes to eighteen-year old Gerda (whom we only see for a few minutes in the last scene) and is accepted. "Congratulations! Hurrah!" cry her three little sisters. Curtain.

One can see Delius' artistic aim in the succession of brief scenes into which he arranged this broken-backed tale. Under the spell of 'Pelleas' and of 'Louise' (a work whose influence during the first decade of the century it is easy to forget) he wanted to pare away inessentials and provide 'short strong emotional impressions given in a series of terse scenes'. Notwithstanding the weakness of the drama and the flatness of the dialogue, he has, to a surprising degree, achieved this end.

It is true that the strongest emotions felt by the composer are concerned with the beauty of nature and the transience of human happiness, and that these are not the prime subject of his story. For much of the time Delius is pouring out his heart over the loveliness of the Norwegian landscape, the stillness and solitude and peace of it all, regardless of the fact that these very features drive Fennimore and Erik into agonies of boredom and really appeal only to the poetic Niels. It is also true that everyone tends to speak at the same slow pace; and that there is seldom a striking vocal phrase to match the flood of beautiful ideas, beautifully scored, that wells out of the orchestra pit.

Nevertheless, the sheer quality of this music, sensitively realised by Joseph Vandernoot and the Fulham Municipal Orchestra, largely silences our rational objections. The preludes to the last two scenes, which Beecham run together to form the 'Intermezzo' that he used to play in the concert room, are typical of much more that lies buried in this rich score. And when the composer turns his eyes away from the landscape of forest and fjord, and begins to attend more closely to the emotional predicaments of his characters, he achieves some notable successes - among them the scene in which Niels and Fennimore confess their guilty love; though it takes place in a leaf-strewn autumn beech-forest, it is a real love scene for all that. Robert Bateman as Niels was the best of the solo singers; and the piece was cleverly staged by Messrs. Basil and Elroy Ashmore.

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AN ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

John G. Hall.

As I missed the centenary broadcast of "Fennimore and Gerda", I was overjoyed at the chance of seeing and hearing the opera at Fulham. The orchestral playing was infinitely better than I had expected it would be - that was the chief thing - and I thought all the singers were good to medium and, at the very least, stylish. Some of the music in the opening scenes sounded weak and only emphasised the banality of the libretto - Delius wedded to everyday trivial conversation is a complete misfit, but in Act II the love scenes are as passionate and almost violent as anything in Puccini. A wonderful change to the innocent pastoral music of the ending. How anyone can claim that Delius' music is all-alike simply beats me, or that it is wishy-washy, all droops and slithers (John Warrack). (I think he must have gone home at the first interval). I can understand what people mean when they say Delius hasn't much of a sense of drama in general, and that this story would have been stronger and more effective if it had stopped with Fennimore's dismissal of Niels, as the Gerda scene is irrelevant and somewhat of an anticlimax, but that is presumably Jacobsen's fault - and it would be a pity to sacrifice the 'Intermezzo' and the rest of the Gerda music.

.....(extract from a letter dated 9th August 1968.)

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NEW PUBLICATIONS

All the Delius songs belonging to Oxford University Press have now been re-published, collected into two volumes costing 18/- each. The contents of each volume are as follows:

Volume 1.

<u>Bjornson:</u> Young Venevil Hidden Love Twilight Fancies.	<u>Ibsen:</u> The Minstrel The Birds Story Cradle Song.
<u>Drachmann:</u> Summer Landscape	<u>MacLeod:</u> Brazil
<u>Josephson:</u> Black Roses.	

Volume 2

Shelley: Love's Philosophy
Indian Love Song
To the Queen of my Heart.

Verlaine: Il Pleure dans mon Coeur.
Chanson D'Automne
Le Ciel est par-dessus
La Lune Blanche

Henley: The Nightingale.

Jacobsen: Let Springtime Come.

Vinje: The Homewood Way.

The publishers are to be congratulated on the considerable trouble that has been spent on the production of these attractive books.

Messrs. Boosey and Hawkes have now re-issued the Miniature Score of 'Appalachia' (HPS 41), this time copied from the Beecham edition's full score. Many members will be interested in noting all the points of difference. I have not received a note of the price, as yet.

I am grateful to Mr. Robert Threfall for supplying this information to me.

Editor.

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