

## HOW THE DELIUS SOCIETY BEGAN

by Rodney Meadows

(reproduced from the *Delius Society Index 1-100*, 1990)

It was *Grove's Dictionary of Music* on the telephone, wanting to know when the Delius Society was founded. Founded? The idea originated with Roland Gibson, hearing on the radio that Beecham had died and realising that something special would be needed to keep the music of Delius alive. So it has been confidently affirmed, but Roland now tells me that the idea goes further back. *Grove's* tried another tack. When did the *Delius Journal* start?

The *Journal* was so named in 1974, with number 43. Previously there had been Newsletters extending back from number 42 to number 4 in July 1964. Before that are fourteen unnumbered Newsletters back to July 1962, and earlier than that at least eight duplicated letters containing news and views written in his inimitable style by Roland Gibson, not dated but evidently from 1961-2.

Eric Fenby has written (*Delius as I knew him*, 1981 edition, p.257),

'The Delius Society of Great Britain arose from the enthusiasm of young members of the audiences, hitherto unknown to each other, who had all travelled to Bradford for the 1962 Centenary Concert.'

This charming tribute has passed into history but is true in a limited sense. Some of us who travelled to Bradford were already Delius Society members, having paid subscriptions. Lyndon Jenkins and I encountered one another for the first time and looked in vain for Roland Gibson, who said he would be, and was, there. Others may have met. Perhaps we might sometime have a reunion.

Roland Gibson early made it clear that he did not relish administration. Alan Tabelin, Secretary of the Schubert Society, was roped in to be Secretary. He issued a 'Delius Society of Great Britain' prospectus and was preparing 'the first new Delius Society recital' when struck down by a heart attack, in December 1961. Roland then informed us, in Newsletters, that he had unsuccessfully approached Felix Aprahamian to administer the Society and it was now probable that David Simmons, 'who knows everybody in the music world', would become our Secretary.

The Delius Society met for the first time on 14th April 1962 in the German YMCA, Lancaster Gate, London W2, 35 members attending. Roland Gibson introduced Robert Aickman, writer and founder of the Inland Waterways Association, who delivered a stirring keynote speech about the importance of establishing a Delius Society, while disclaiming any intention to be involved in running it. There was then a call for volunteers, at which Mrs Betty Ruffle arose saying that she had much experience in running societies and would be glad to serve as Secretary. Estelle Palmley, Charles Barnard, Jeffrey Guffogg and I offered to become Committee members. Roland Gibson agreed to continue as convenor.

The Committee met some seven times, more or less, in 1962, at the Royal Festival Hall (in the bar area) or the Royal College of Music or Felix Aprahamian's office in Montague Street. David Simmons, having been introduced, asked that his position be recognised in some way. It was suggested and agreed that he be Chairman of the Committee and Roland Gibson Vice Chairman. Betty Ruffle later brought in Ann Todd to act as Treasurer. Jeffrey Guffogg soon moved to Hertfordshire and left the Committee. Until the meeting of 17th December 1962 no Committee minutes or record of any kind were kept. From then a complete file of minutes exists, recording how the Society was administered.

My personal diary is another, more frank, record. I quote from it sparingly about those early Committee meetings, in deference to libel. *10th May 1962*: RFH. 'Simmons an ageing youngster, but likeable. Wide-ranging discussion. Betty determined to dominate.' *8th June*: Montague Street. 'FA answers our questions and explains about Delius Trust. Very sound in his procedural ideas and what should be done for music of Delius. Simmons rather subdued, overawed by FA. A most encouraging session.' *3rd July*: RFH. 'No one else appears.' *10th July*: RFH. 'No business seems to get going at all.' *10th September*: RCM. 'Only Betty, Ann and I turn up. Simmons forgot.' *12th November*: RCM. 'Get my spoke in.' *3rd December*: RCM. 'Something done, especially re social. Really these women have some mad ideas. Social will be one hell of a booze-up.' *17th December*: RCM. 'Bit better than usual. I offer to do Committee minutes.'

It should by now be apparent that the Society was seriously adrift. Since Roland Gibson's early letters three brief Newsletters had been sent out.

Widespread complaints were coming in from people in various parts of the country wanting to join who had written and heard nothing. Society meetings since 14th April amounted to one, a social at the Royal College of Music on 10th December. The Committee was meeting often and to small purpose.

My diary goes on. *19th February 1963*: 'Phone Simmons, he agrees we must take action about Delius Society.' *25th February*: Montague Street. 'Simmons, I, Guffogg and Barnard salvaging Delius Society. FA advises us and has much interesting news and gossip.' *19th March*: Montague Street. '6.00 p.m. Committee. Betty blows in about 6.20.

Simmons has to leave at about 6.50 for a concert. So we are all rather spasmodic. Betty's explanations for lapse of Delius Society affairs very weak.' 25th March: Montague Street. 'Newsletter meeting without Betty, but we got on to general topics. I insist that newsletter and membership details be taken off Betty. Win the points. We also convince FA that Betty is not reliable. Feel exhausted at end of meeting, but we get Betty off the newsletter and membership.' 22nd April: RCM. 'Fairly satisfactory, Betty again overborne, am empowered to tackle agency and have newsletter redone.' 4th May: The Society's first AGM at Queen Alexandra Hall. RCO. 'Surprising the Committee does not get a mauling. Members contribute useful discussion.' 6th May: Committee meeting at Great Northern House (the venue thereafter for some 20 years). 'Not much decided.' 31 July: G. N. House. 'We sack Betty in her absence: 4th September: G.N. House. 'Estelle Palmley now Secretary.'

This seems to be a convenient stopping point. The Society had held its first Annual General Meeting and its first weekday evening meeting (at Holborn Library): it had a newsletter and a secretary: the Committee was meeting in proper premises and minutes were kept. The only remaining hurdle was the Rules, which were formulated by Estelle and myself working from a Wagner Society model provided by Robert Aickman. We filtered out some of the more draconian powers given to the Committee in the Wagner document against Robert's advice and insistence that we would 'regret our leniency'. So far we have not.

The Editor has asked me to write about the personalities in that first committee. The character of Roland Gibson will by now have emerged, and is well known to present members. His was the idea, without which there would have been no Society. But it was transient. As early as May 1962 he was writing to members. 'the very fact that I started a new Delius Society makes me wonder whether it does not foreshadow a decline in my liking for Delius's music, possibly being an expression of a fear of losing something precious.' In 1967 he became a Vice President and left the Committee. Despite the words quoted Roland has continued to write and lecture on Delius, and indeed any musical matter, with enthusiasm apparently undiminished.

Betty Ruffle has been given a rough ride in these notes. She had perhaps too many concurrent commitments. Other interests proved equally pressing. She might have functioned better with an experienced Chairman and a strong Committee. We were all feeling our way in those days.

Estelle Palmley was the Society's salvation. She resigned from the Committee after the first few meetings, saying that she did not seem able to contribute anything much. Her return in summer 1963, and appointment to the vacancy of Secretary, was followed by a flurry of activity. No one can fully appreciate how hard she worked in organising meetings, corresponding with members, supplying news, promoting the Society and making people welcome. Ever modest, she declined to take on the Newsletter, because there was already enough for the Secretary to do. How typical of Estelle soon afterwards in May 1964 to start issuing, as an extra mailing for members, Secretary's Notes full of events, gossip and news extracts two or three times a year, as large an undertaking as the early Newsletters and a further valuable record of the Society's history in its first 10 years.

Looking around that first Committee at the German YMCA I was dismayed. Setting up a Society requires hard work. The only potential allies looked to be Charles Barnard, and perhaps Jeffrey Guffogg. Charles, apart from inspirational flights, turned out to be a doer and was a pioneer. He shouldered many necessary tasks, being the first regular editor of the Newsletter, from 1964 to the end of 1965, and also giving the first two mid-week evening programmes for the Society in the lecture hall of Holborn Public Library, tape recordings of Delius items on 24th July and 29th November 1963. Trained in management and therefore impatient of inefficiency, Charles was essential to the survival of the Society.

David Simmons takes up the rest of my narrative, having been Chairman of the Society from 1962 to 1971. The obituary in the Journal, following his sudden death from a heart attack in 1978, was brief and deserves more. David was a musical journalist, educated not at any music academy but at the London School of Economics, and a contemporary of Bernard Levin. He was rather the Neville Cardus type of critic and, to judge from his regular writing in *Musical Opinion* and *The Strad* and occasional contributions to the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*, a good one. The one book he penned, *First Flute*, an 'autobiography' of Gerald Jackson, arose from an early Delius Society meeting when Lionel Bentley, Gerald Jackson and Jack Brymer reminisced about Beecham. We took them to a pub first and the evening was a roaring success, alas not tape recorded. Afterwards Gerald Jackson confided that he had always wanted to write his memoirs. An excellent book resulted, ghost-written by David.

There was no doubting his devotion to Delius, to most of British music and to the memory of Beecham. Starting without perceptible previous experience or much capability, he learnt on the job, as it were, and things settled down on the Committee. In this he was sustained by the total dedication and efficiency of Estelle Palmley as Secretary. When in the early 1970s she became exhausted and wished to withdraw, he was unable to keep the Society going and had to resign. David was and continued to be a rolling stone.

Eric Fenby perchance to his own amazement is our longest serving officer, since his acceptance of the Presidency was announced by Roland Gibson in a Newsletter of early summer 1962. For some months contact with the Society

was 'at arm's length'. On reading the earlier part of this narrative, who could blame him? Societies come and go. This one must have looked precarious. Gradually confidence strengthened. Since those early days he has been the most understanding and loyal of Presidents, ever ready to delight us with recitals and talks and advice, ever patient with naive questioning. While Fenby is with us, the Society feels secure.