Royal Opera
Covent Garden

London & Provincial Opera Society, Ltd., Season
In conjunction with The Imperial League of Opera

opening night of the season
Monday, September 23rd, 1935, at 8.30

In English

KOANGA

By FREDERICK DELIUS
(First Performance in England)

Koanga
Don José: Martinez
Simon Perez
Rangwa
Uncle Joe
Palmira
Clothilda
Ramie
Helene
Jeanne
Merle
Aurora
Hartense
Oliva
Paulette

John Brownlee
Leyland White
Frank Sale
Reginald Thurgood
Leslie Horsman
Oda Slobodskaya
Constance Willis
Enid James
Elisabeth Aveling
Barbara Lane
Patricia Guest
Dorothy Donaldson
Pauline Gray
Vanny Davies
Esme Webb

Conductor: Sir Thomas Beecham, Bart.

THE DELIUS SOCIETY JOURNAL
Andrew Black, the first Koanga [coll. L Carley]
KOANGA

the 1935 production of Frederick Delius's opera
in the context of its performance history

documentation and sources

by
Lewis Foreman

The Delius Society
1994
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Translations from the German have been specially prepared by Julia Chandler, Denis Crowder and Jürgen Schaarwächter. Lionel Carley and Stephen Lloyd have been more than generous with their assistance and documentation. Not only has Stephen researched much of the data in the documentary sections of this study but in his editorial capacity he has acted as midwife in the realisation of the compiler's concept. To him a special thank you, for without his enthusiasm and knowledge it would surely never have appeared.

The quality of the original cuttings varies considerably. In one or two cases they are so poor we have re-set the text. Generally, however, the cuttings are reproduced as facsimiles of the originals. We apologise if this results in an uneven quality of printing on some pages.

The photograph of Delius (p.11) is from the Delius Trust Archive, and the illustration from The Grandissimes (p.16) and the photograph of Andrew Black (inside front cover) come from the collection of Lionel Carley. The photographs of the 1935 production (pp. 4, 44 and 56) are from the Royal Opera House Archives. The sketches from Radio Times (pp. 32 and 33) and The Listener (p.39) are reproduced with acknowledgement to the BBC. All other illustrations are from the compiler's collection.

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Koanga, Act I: Set design by Nicholas de Molas

[photo Royal Opera House Archives]
THE LURE OF DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

by Lewis Foreman

We document first performances in order to place a work in (or sometimes outside) the context of its time. ‘Reception studies’ are all the rage just now in academic circles, and often by studying how a work was first received we may illuminate the development of a composer’s career, better understand an emerging trend, and place the music in its period and ours.

Yet contemporary accounts and assessments of music can be remarkably misleading: a development, say, which we now take for granted may have once been considered bizarre; a work found to exemplify the spirit of the times in 1890 may now be found just dull, and another then thought to be wayward and eccentric may now be considered a masterwork. So, too, on the operatic stage. Sets that were once said to be quaint or exotic may now seem just amateurish or crude. It may, of course, be that they were recognised as pretty poor at the time, but there was nothing better to put in their place!

A case in point as far as these musings are concerned is Delius’s opera Koanga. As all Delians will know, extracts were heard in London in Delius’s famous concert of his music at St James’s Hall in 1899, and it was first produced in Germany in 1904. Yet when Sir Thomas Beecham came to stage the opera at Covent Garden in 1935, and then took it north on an autumn tour, it was for almost all its audiences a new work, although composed nearly 40 years before.

The press coverage Koanga received in 1935 was substantial. Even provincial papers with no apparent interest in the doings of Covent Garden covered the London performances. Yet reading between the lines (or in one or two cases the actual accounts), if we could return to those performances from today we would almost certainly find the décor and production stilted and old-fashioned, but what would undoubtedly remain would be Beecham’s glorious vision of Delius’s lovely music (so far as is known no recording survives). However, the closing scene, recorded by Beecham on 4 and 11 December 1934 for the first Delius Society album, surely conveys the flavour.

To sift through the press cuttings and memorabilia of any stage performance is a valuable process in understanding what happened, and although it results in innumerable repetitions of the same garbled story, it also produces a variety of facts and impressions on which a more formally constructed history can be based. So what I am offering here is essentially a scrapbook of the Beecham 1935 performance of Koanga set in the context of a range of background and history concerning the other performances the opera has received. At a time when the 1972 Sadler’s Wells production has been issued on CD (on Intaglio, reviewed in Delius Society Journal No 111, Summer 1993), new attention has been turned on Delius’s opera which has been out of the limelight for many years. What we have is not a world-shaking masterpiece, but an atmospheric and rewarding score with too many of Delius’s high-points for it not to be seen again on stage. I hope this short study may provide a context for the forthcoming Leeds Youth Opera production (see p.64).
KOANGA: A PERFORMANCE CHRONOLOGY

by Stephen Lloyd

1899 30 May St James’s Hall, London
- Concert performance of Prelude to Act III, Quintet and Finale Act I, and Act II complete
  Andrew Black (Koanga), Ella Russell (Palmyra), Tilly Koenen (Clotilda),
  G A Vanderbeeck (Simon Perez), William Llewellyn (Don José Martinez)
- Conductor: Alfred Hertz
- Further reference: Carley, Delius: A Life in Letters Vol 1 pp.142-154 passim; Cover and inside of programme, and brief Manchester Courier review 31.5.99 in Carley & Threlfall, Delius: A Life in Pictures pp.41-3

1904 30 March and two other performances Stadttheater, Elberfeld
  Clarence Whitehill (Koanga), Rose Kaiser (Palmyra), Georg Förster (Simon Perez), Max Birkholz (Don José Martinez), Charlotte Lengenberg (Clotilda)
- Conductor: Fritz Cassirer; Producer: Jacques Goldberg

1935 23 (b/cast) & 27 September and 3 October Covent Garden, London
  12 October (Act III b/cast) Birmingham
  18 & 21 October (Acts I & II b/cast, 21) Liverpool
  28 October and 2 November (matinée) Manchester
  11 November Bradford
  23 November Leeds
  John Brownlee (Koanga), Oda Slobodskaya (Palmyra), Leyland White (Don José Martinez), Frank Sale (Simon Perez), Reginald Thurgood (Rangwan), Leslie Horsman (Uncle Joe), Constance Willis (Clotilda); Enid James, Elisabeth Aveling, Barbara Lane, Patricia Guest, Dorothy Donaldson, Pauline Gray, Vanwy Davies, Esme Webb (Planters’ daughters)
  London Philharmonic Orchestra
- Conductor: Sir Thomas Beecham; Stage Director: Charles Moor; Assistant Director: Percy Heming; Dance Arranger: Antony Tudor
- Alterations: La Calinda was used as an introduction to Act Two. Beecham also inserted the Irmelin Prelude in the last act at [20].

1946 8 November Delius Festival Royal Albert Hall, London
- Concert performance of Act III and Epilogue
  Roderick Jones (Koanga), Victoria Sladen (Palmyra), Trevor Anthony (Rangwan and Uncle Joe), Bruce Black (Don José Martinez), Leslie Jones (Simon Perez)
  Croydon Philharmonic Society, Stock Exchange Male Voice Choir
  Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
- Conductor: Richard Austin
1958 1 & 2 February  BBC Third Programme  BBC broadcasts
Lawrence Winters (Koanga), Lenore Lafayette (Palmyra), Ronald Lewis (Don José Martinez), Monica Sinclair (Clotilda), Robert Thomas (Simon Perez), Stanley Clarkson (Rangwan and Uncle Joe); Ellen Dales, Ann D owdall, Betty Hutchings, Joyce Eyre, Joan Cairns, Irene Brightman, Kathleen Newton, Beatrice Andrews (Planters’ daughters)
BBC Chorus, BBC Symphony Orchestra
• Conductor: Stanford Robinson
• Alterations and cuts: Act 11: La Caiinda was used as an introduction; 20 bars cut at 4 after [9]; Act 111: 10 bars from 4 before [22] until 4 before [23]; 13 bars at [25]; 17 bars from 4 before [28] until Piu vivo before [30]; last 6 bars of Palmyra’s farewell between [37] and [40] with some adjustment to final bar (1935 VS does not show cue numbers 38 and 39)

Eugene Holmes (Koanga, 18 & 20), Claudia Lindsey (Palmyra), Edward Pierson (Uncle Joe and Rangwan, 18 & 20; Koanga, 21), Isaiah Lurry (Uncle Joe, 21), William McDonald (Simon Perez), Will Roy (Don José Martinez), Joyce Gerber (Clotilda), Michael Malovic (Rangwan, 21); Judith Benson, Sandra Blake, Dolores Brown, Yvonne Easter, Adreana Hardy, Janet Kenney, Monica Ortiz, Martha Randall (Planters’ daughters)
Opera Society of Washington Orchestra and Chorus
• Conductor: Paul Callaway; director: Frank Corsaro; Scenery and Film Designer: Ronald Chase
• Alterations and cuts: Act 11: La Calinda was used as an introduction; 20 bars cut at 4 after [9]; Act 111: 9 bars from 4 before [22] until 5 before [23]; 13 bars from [25]; 21 bars from [28] to 1 before [30]
• A composite recording derived from the dress rehearsal on 17 December and the performances of 18 and 20 December with some orchestral interludes from 21 December was issued in a 2-LP set on IGS081-2
1972 17, 19 & 20 May Sadler’s Wells Theatre, London
Eugene Holmes (Koanga), Claudia Lindsey (Palmyra), Gordon Wilcock (Simon Perez), Powell Harrison (Don José Martinez), Anthony Raffell (Uncle Joe and Rangwan), Wendy Pollock (Rene), Caroline Kimball (Hélène), Alice Herbert (Jeanne), Elspeth Mack (Marie), Nuala Willis (Aurore), Joan Newman-Price (Hortense), Avril Gray (Olive), Vivien Hallam (Paulette), Jean Allister (Clotilda); David Harrison, Roger Bryson (Negroes)
Camden Festival Chorus, London Symphony Orchestra.
- Conductor: Charles Groves; Producer: Charles Craig; Designer: Peter Rice; Choreographer: Robert Solomon
- For this production the libretto was revised by Douglas Craig and Andrew Page
- Further reference, reviews, etc.: Financial Times 18.5.72, Evening News 18.5.72, The Times 18.5.72, Daily Telegraph 18.5.72, The Guardian 18.5.72 (see Delius Society Newsletter 38 pp.9-10), The Observer Review 21.5.72, Sunday Times 21.5.72, Sunday Telegraph 21.5.72, The Stage and Television Today 25.5.72, New Statesman 26.5.72 (see Delius Society Newsletter 38 pp.6-13).
- The performance of 19 May was broadcast live by the BBC and has subsequently been issued on Intaglio INCD7442 (see Journal 111 pp.24-5).

1973 19-26 September Kingsway Hall, London EMI recording SLS974
Eugene Holmes (Koanga), Claudia Lindsey (Palmyra), Raimund Herincx (Don José Martinez), Keith Erwen (Simon Perez), Jean Allister (Clotilda), Simon Estes (Rangwan & Uncle Joe); Elaine Barry, Pamela Smith, Eleanor Capp, Valerie Hill, Doreen Walker, Jean Temperley, Lesley Reid, Patricia Hogan (Planters’ daughters); John Dudley, William Mason (Negroes)
John Alldis Choir, London Symphony Orchestra
- Conductor: Sir Charles Groves; Recording Producer: Christopher Bishop; Balancing Engineer: Christopher Parker
- Further reference, reviews, etc.: Sleeve-notes by Eric Fenby and ‘An Introductory Note to the Libretto by Douglas Craig and Andrew Page’; The Guardian 6.8.74 (see Delius Society Journal 46 pp.25-7); Gramophone June 1974 pp.100 & 105

1980 25 & 27 April Shreveport Civic Centre, Louisiana, USA
Edward Pierson (Koanga), Claudia Lindsey (Palmyra)
- Conductor: John Shenaut; Director: Thomas Holliday
- Reviews, etc.: None received
KOANGA: History and Background

by Lewis Foreman

Much of the background to the composition and performance of Koanga is documented in the accounts by Eric Fenby and others reproduced elsewhere in this study. As Robert Threlfall has pointed out, Koanga was the third opera by Delius to be completed - in 1897 - but was the first from which music was heard - in 1899. It was also the first to be produced, in 1904. Once his reputation was secured by the music written after, say, 1899, it was also the first of his earlier works to achieve publication, in 1935.

The celebrated all-Delius programme which took place in London's St James's Hall (between Piccadilly and Regent Street on the site of the present Piccadilly Hotel) on 30 May 1899, devoted its second half to extended extracts from Koanga:

- Prelude to Act III
- Quintet and Finale of Act I
- Act II (complete)

The programme book for this concert is now very rare but a copy which survives in the USA has revealed that it contained the libretto for Act II in its original form. By the time Delius came to produce the work in Elberfeld in 1904, he was already changing the libretto - and thus in consequence the music. One of the principal characteristics of the history of Koanga is thus established at the outset: constant revision to the libretto, which has differed - until very recently - every time the opera has been produced.

Imagine what the press and audience reception might be today for a totally unknown British composer in his thirties who suddenly turns up from France with a three-hour programme of new music. My guess would be a large corporate yawn, apathy, and an almost empty hall, with little or no press coverage. It says much for Delius's music therefore that he had a reception that was remarkably cordial and was given considerable coverage by the press. Heseltine quoted extensively from the press cuttings in his Delius. A collection of some 25 cuttings relating to this concert are to be found in the Library of Congress, received from one Richard Muller of South Carolina in 1950. Before continuing with the story of Delius's Koanga, we need to get the flavour of the reception of Koanga in 1899, and the following selection of contemporary cuttings is taken from copies of the Library of Congress collection in the Delius Trust Archive. None duplicate texts quoted by Heseltine.

2. Warlock, Peter (Philip Heseltine): Frederick Delius, reprinted with additions, annotations and comments by Hubert Foss, Bodley Head, 1952, pp.58-61
A NEW OPERA COMPOSER

'KOANGA'

Opera, in Three Acts, by Fritz Delius

Koanga ........................................ Mr Andrew Black
Clotilde ......................................... Miss Tilly Koenen
Palmyre ........................................ Madame Ella Russell
Don José Martínez ............................. Mr Wm. Llewellyn

Mr Fritz Delius, who gave an orchestral concert at St James's Hall on Tuesday, is, it appears, a native of Yorkshire, but his training has been acquired at Paris and Leipsig. The libretto of his opera Koanga is by Mr C F Keary, and is founded on a tale by George Cable, a popular novelist of the Southern States of America. The story of the opera relates to slave life and Negro superstitions, the result being a curious mixture of Wagner, Tschaikowsky, and Nigger melodies, the opera opening with a plantation chorus -

Now once in a way.
Be it but for a day,
We lay down our shovels and our hoes, &c.

Exciting, melodramatic incidents, contrasted with Creole dances and Voodoo religious rites, afford the composer ample scope for startling and novel effects, but it is hardly possible to judge of the artistic qualities of the work apart from the stage. Koanga, the hero, is leader of a party of escaped Negroes, and a love story connects the main incidents, and ends tragically. The original tale by George W Cable gives an interesting picture of Negro life on the Southern plantations and the wind [sic] religious ceremonies of the superstitious blacks and their Voodoo worship. How far the subject may prove attractive upon the stage remains to be seen, but the composer has evidently treated the story with much ingenuity and with faith in its capabilities. Let us hope we may have an opportunity of seeing it performed.

(The Era, 8 June 1899)

'Every bar of Mr Delius's music shows high musicianship, an astonishing mastery of notes, and a degree of vital energy quite as astonishing.'

(Saturday Review, 10 June 1899)

'Mr Delius is a musician of his own day, and not of the past. So much is clear on every page of his scores. He stands forward as an embodiment of the modern spirit ... Alike in orchestral works, in song, and in operatic scenes this composer strikes one as really having something to tell us in a masterful fashion, which will not be denied.'

(The Daily Telegraph, 1 June 1899)
Delius in 1899 by courtesy of the Delius Trust.
... we recognise in Mr Delius a composer of strong originality. His music is sure to be warmly discussed, which is a proof of its unconventionality. For our part we own to having been deeply impressed, and we gladly welcome the advent of a composer who has something new to say, and is not afraid of saying it.'

(The Morning Post, 31 May, the first of two notices)

... we were brought face to face with a new composer who has something to say and knows how to say it in his own way. ... such vivid vitality of colour as in the Koanga music...'

(The Morning Leader, 3 June)

'The unexpected always happens. Last night I went to the concert given at St James's Hall by Mr Delius of his own compositions, prepared for anything rather than the revelation of real genius which actually awaited one. ... The second part of the concert was given up to extracts from the opera Koanga, founded on Mr Cable's novel The Grandissimes. It is, of course, difficult to judge operatic music under such conditions; but it appeared to be the best of all. The use made of the banjo in the orchestra is highly effective, and to its appearance in a musical illustration of a negro festival would be the height of pedantry. The negro choruses and dances are quite beautiful, and full of character, and the orchestra is in many places brilliantly ingenious. But the gem of the evening was the baritone solo, 'Far, far away, Palmyre', in which Mr Andrew Black sang with an amount of fervour and power which cannot be overpraised.'

(The Star, 31 May)

'But the real and genuine triumph which Mr Delius scored was in the second act of his opera Koanga ... [in which] the opportunity is given for intense dramatic writing and for music of a highly descriptive character, and Mr Delius avails himself of that opportunity with vital quickness. ... We were struck by the great, the almost lavish, power ... aglow with strong feeling, tremendously sincere, and at times broadening, especially in Koanga's (Mr Andrew Black) music, into big, swinging phrases of massive significance...'

(Pall Mall Gazette, 31 May)

'... but in St James's Hall I must own that the banjoes seemed ludicrously incongruous to me after long quotations, or reminiscences, from Tristan...'

(Saturday Review, 9 June)
... The harmonic progressions are almost always bizarre and sometimes agreeable; but the exceedingly unmelodious character of much of the music and its prevailing gloom mark it out for the admiration of the few who profess a preference for ugly music... The musical accentuation of the words [of Koanga] was decidedly peculiar, and the work, so far as can be judged by this extract, contains little that is dramatic in any true sense, or remarkable in any way. The very ungrateful solo parts were taken by Mme Ella Russell... and Andrew Black. The local colour is supplied by choruses of negro slaves, in the accompaniment of whose remarks the banjo plays a prominent and far from agreeable part.'

(The Times, 31 May)

... the excerpts from his opera Koanga, which formed the second part, showed that Mr Delius has a strong dramatic gift, both for orchestral and vocal expression; the two scenes allotted to the baritone, Mr Andrew Black, being particularly strong and forcible, and well for the composer was it that he had an artist of the calibre of the Scottish baritone to represent him in such an important role.'

(The Morning Advertiser, 31 May)

'Another German conductor won the highest acclaim yesterday evening with the orchestral works of Fritz Delius. He is Mr Alfred Hertz, newly appointed at the Breslau Municipal Theatre, who until now was working at the Elberfeld Municipal Theatre. Through the efforts of this fine artist Fritz Delius, I have come to know a well-known, or one can almost say a famous, man at one go. Hertz had to assemble an orchestra of more than a hundred persons, a men's and a women's choir, not to mention the numerous soloists, for the performance of Delius's works. In a comparatively short time he rehearsed this difficult music of the young composer with these orchestral and choral masses in such a way that it revealed a vivid, colourful image of his abilities.

'Nobody will deny Delius a thorough knowledge of the technique, a complete control of orchestral effects as well as an inventiveness that charms as long as the composer does not desperately bring to it a totally unnecessary originality. In his songs and the extracts from his negro-opera Koanga the stream of his inventiveness flows unrestricted; therefore they evoked the largest applause. His song Irmelin Rose is a pearl, and in his opera melancholy and embers of love, joyful life and revengeful ache combine in the most natural way. The melodic choruses are treated with particular skill; of the younger composers only d'Erlanger would be able to equal that. One can agree less with the symphonic music. But it would be presumptuous to pass a final judgement after only one hearing...'  

(A German review by Otto Brandes in an unidentified German newspaper. This translation by Jürgen Schaarwächter)
The parallel between Elgar and Delius, both composers suddenly to the fore, was also drawn.

Two Promising Young Men

ELGAR and DELIUS

"Enigma" Variations and "Koanga"

Two concerts recently have attracted some attention. One was in the St. James's Hall, Piccadilly, on May 30th in which, from half past eight until nearly midnight, the music of a man of thirty-six, Frederick Delius by name and born in Yorkshire, kept an attentive audience half played and half puzzled. The other concert was in the same Hall, and was a signal feat of orchestral canto under the baton of Richter, and contained the first performance of a set of variations by Edward Elgar, the "Enigma".

It is true that Mr. Elgar is forty-two, and even at thirty-six Mr. Delius would be considered elderly in, let us say, cricketing circles. But no hard is the struggle for recognition in modern England, already on the threshold of the twentieth century, that almost anyone under thirty-six is considered a newcomer. Young and, perhaps, promising. The position of these two young men differs materially. Mr. Elgar is by far the better known; that is to say, he is not entirely unknown in the west country, and has even been performed in the Batteries. Mr. Delius however is something quite new, largely because he resides abroad, and indeed has included in his career the management of a banana for is it an orange? plantation in Florida.

The Variations on an Original Theme consist of a series of items preceded by the initials or nicknames of various friends of Mr. Elgar. Some of these denote winning and vocal forces for Mr. Delius's concert. Hertz conducted, coming over from Breslau, while the leader of the orchestra came over from Norway. The whole second part of the concert was given over to excerpts from the opera, Koanga, and although the libretto found little favour, some of the music, especially the orchestral dance of "The Calinda," is likely to have permanent appeal. Exotic is surely the word for Mr. Delius subject—-the slave plantation. Conductor and leader-German and Norwegian. Mr. Delius himself, born in Yorkshire of German extraction, worked in Florida, lives in Paris. It should not be a matter of surprise that this hotch-potch gives us strange harmonies and original melodies. Less assured and experienced than Mr. Elgar, this composer will be just as worth future hearings.

War Appointments

A communication from the War Office, dated December 10th, names Field-Marshal Lord Roberts as Commander in Chief of Her Majesty's forces in the field in South Africa, with General Lord Kitchener as his Chief of Staff.

Mr. Winston Churchill

Cape Town, December 22nd, 1899. Mr. Winston Churchill, who had been taken prisoner near Colenso and sent to Pretoria, escaped, and after much hardship reached Delagoa Bay in safety.
A brief history of the libretto of *Koanga* will be appropriate at this point. Over 20 years ago, William Randel published a detailed consideration of the tangled path which led from George W. Cable’s novel *The Grandissimes* to the final version of Delius’s opera as represented in the available performing materials today.\(^3\) Randel and Carley\(^4\) are my sources for much of what follows. Cable’s novel first appeared in instalments in the journal *Scribner’s Monthly* between November 1879 and October 1880, though whether Cable wrote the novel, Dickens-like, while it was being published is not known. Almost immediately serialisation was completed, the book was published, and has been reissued on several occasions since (the British Library Catalogue lists three editions between 1880 and 1899).

Delius first trod American soil in 1884, when Cable’s novel must have been easily available, but there is no evidence that he actually read it at the time. It seems more likely that Delius’s experience of the magic of the sights and sounds of the country around his plantation at Solana Grove and the St Johns River were focused by the background of Cable’s book which later reminded him of them.

It is already difficult to remember when Delius’s first two operas *The Magic Fountain* and *Irmelin* were outside the experience of most Delians, yet this was in fact remarkably recently. Neither was produced in Delius’s lifetime, which gave their successor, *Koanga*, a considerable status.

It was the libretti of his early operas that caused Delius so much trouble. At first he reported that he was writing the ‘words and music’ of *Koanga* ‘at the same time’, but Delius was quick to admit that ‘my literature is not on a level with my music’.\(^5\) In his search for a librettist for his opera based on an episode from Cable’s novel, Delius turned to Charles Francis Keary (1848–1917), a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge. Randel suggests that Delius may have been dazzled by Keary’s superficial trappings of successful author. ‘His third novel, *Herbert Vanlennert*, had just been published; *The Outlines of Primitive Belief* (1882) gave him standing as an authority on myth; his *Norway and the Norwegians* (1892) expressed a deep love for that country that Delius could share; and *A Wanderer*, first published in 1888 and reissued in 1895, had a subtle romanticism that must have been irresistible to Delius. Some reviewers had been critical, charging Keary with writing too fast, inadequate revising, and never rising above the commonplace. If these judgements were valid, we have one reason for the gross weakness of the *Koanga* libretto. A second and more substantial reason is that Keary was unfamiliar with American literature and Negro speech. A third reason, overarching the other two, is conjectural: that Delius was so impressed by the list of Keary’s books that he accepted without question his radical modifications of Cable’s language. Keary was out of his element, but neither he nor Delius seemed aware of the fact.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Delius to Jutta Bell. 25 Feb 1896; Carley *op cit* p.99
\(^6\) Randel, *op cit* p.143
Herter's illustration of Bras-Coupe (Koanga) in *The Grandissimes*, and Cable's signature on the fly-leaf of a copy of his novel [coll. L. Carley]
THE 1904 PRODUCTION AT ELBERFELD

When Koanga came to London in the 1930s, its successor, the far more familiar A Village Romeo and Juliet, had also been fairly recently heard (BBC 1932 and RCM 1934) and was fresh in commentators' minds, and they tended to take it as a benchmark. This comparison was also made by Fritz Cassirer, the conductor of Delius's first produced opera, when Koanga was seen at the Stadttheater, Elberfeld, starting on 30 March 1904. Cassirer did not take the later view that Koanga was but a step on the road to A Village Romeo and Juliet; he wrote to Delius on 13 May: 'If I have to make one reservation [of A Village Romeo], then it is to the effect that the romantic nature of the subject has not allowed your musical language to remain on the absolutely original level of Koanga. I am so spoiled by Koanga that I would not permit anything of that kind to you, of all people.' 7

Delius's sister Clare was living in Bonn in 1904, whence she had taken her children in order that they might learn German (an essential accomplishment for many in 1904). She left us this vivid account of the background to the first stage presentation of Koanga.8

While I was there I had a letter from Fred asking me to come to Elberfeld, where his opera Koanga was to be produced at the Opera House for the first time. It was a very interesting and exciting experience for me. On my arrival I was met by my sister-in-law, whose acquaintance I had not made until then. She told me that Fred was very busy with the rehearsal, and that we were to go straight to the theatre. It was my first experience of anything of the kind. and it was all the more intriguing because of what I may call the family atmosphere. Part of the scenery had been designed by my sister-in-law, and was extraordinarily effective. I saw Fred, then, in quite a new light. He was conducting the rehearsal in person, and I detected distinct traits of our father's martinet methods in the way in which he treated the cast. His wife and I were the only spectators, and for several hours I was absorbed in the production.

The title role was taken by Clarence Whitehill, an American, who afterwards sang at Covent Garden. The performance was under the direction of Fritz Cassirer, and other members of the cast were Rose Kaiser, who took the part of Palmyra, and Charlotte Lengenberg, who played the part of Clothilde. On the evening of the rehearsal Whitehill came to our hotel in a rather bad state of nerves. He was concerned as to how the audience would accept his costume, or rather lack of it, for he had to appear with his body completely blacked and wearing only a leopard skin. In those days nudism was not the feature of the stage that it is to-day [1935]. There was a risk, in 1904, that the audience might disapprove, in which case the opera might be doomed. There was another anxiety, too. Rose Kaiser was dissatisfied with her costume, and showed a dangerous inclination to develop a temperamental sore throat in consequence.

7. Carley, op cit., p.240
I suppose all first performances are liable to these stresses and strains but as I was new to the experience I make mention of them here. My sister-in-law inspected Palmyra’s costume, suggested various alterations, and by her tact and sweetness tided over the difficulty. But Whitehill’s case was almost beyond human aid. He had to be black, and he had to wear only a leopard skin.

On the great night itself we repaired in good time to the theatre, where my sister-in-law, leaving nothing to chance, took me to Palmyra’s dressing-room. There she suggested still more alterations in the disputed costume, which were charmingly effective. I may mention that Palmyra was supposed to be a very beautiful Quadroon, and that the tragic story of Palmyra and Koanga is one of America’s favourite legends.
'When it was almost time for the curtain to go up, Fred, my sister-in-law and I repaired to our box. I do not know in what state were the nerves of my companions, but as they were more immediately interested, I expect they were even more jumpy than mine. Our qualms with regard to Clarence Whitehill’s costume were almost immediately set at rest. When he appeared upon the stage, his imposing and magnificent figure drew a round of applause from the audience, and we could breathe again. There was no doubt about the success of the opera. The enthusiasm was wonderful, and Fred was called before the curtain again and again. I remember, as I witnessed this tribute to his art, getting a picture of the Fred who used to come into the schoolroom at home and play to us and tell us of his ambitions, which then only figured as dreams, impossible of realisation. And there he was, in the heart of musical Germany, “arrived”!

‘As far as I know there was only one complaint about Koanga, which was received with great appreciation by the critics, and that came from Whitehill. He visited us at our hotel the next morning to talk over the great evening. He told Fred that he loved his art and enjoyed every note of it, but added, “Next time you write an opera do make me a white fellow; you have no idea the difficulty I have in cleaning myself white again.”

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‘“A Fellow Student!”, writing in 1907 9 - he had been at the Leipzig Conservatorium with Fred – relates how the complete performance of Koanga came to take place:

‘It is rather amusing to think that had it not been for the appointment of Mr Cassirer as conductor of the opera at Elberfeld, this work might still be lying, a happy hunting ground for flies, upon the musty shelves of the theatre library. For three years the full score had remained there and had been inspected by several successive conductors, every one of whom declared his inability to read the notes, so large was the paper used and so small the handwriting. Such a comparative trifle, however, did not deter Mr Cassirer, who quickly detected in it music out of the common. But even he has confessed that he was unable to study the score by night, since if he held the lamp up in order to read the flute and other high instrumental parts, those of the bass instruments were all in total darkness, while the opposite was the case if the lamp were placed upon the table. In the cast of Koanga was Mr Clarence Whitehill, whose Wotan was so much admired in Der Ring at Covent Garden last summer; and great was the amusement when he appeared as a Negro slave garbed in a costume similar to that so frequently seen when Miss May Yohe10 played in London. The first performance came near to falling through from the “illness” of the prima donna, who being diagnosed, proved to be due to nothing more dangerous than the want of sufficiently becoming costume...’

9. Robin Legge, The Daily Telegraph, Saturday 16 November 1907
10. Miss May Augusta ('May') Yohe from Pennsylvania, made her London début in 1893 in *The Magic Opal* with music by Albéniz. 'A vivacious little creature of partial Indian extraction with a rough, untrained contralto of minimal range... succeeded in winning an important section of the public (principally male) to her cause by sheer personal effect.' Later that same year, in Hervé's *Mamselle Nitouche*, her temperament came to the fore when she stamped and shrieked and told the conductor, a young Henry Wood, that he 'couldn't conduct for nuts', finally terminating her contract. From all accounts Miss Yohe did not have much of a voice. She had been to Paris to 'study the infamous routines of the Parisian Quadrille dancers' [Kurt Gänzl, *The British Musical Theatre Vol I 1865-1914*, Macmillan 1986].

We have very few press cuttings of this production, and I am grateful to Lionel Carley for providing me with a copy of this unidentified review, and to Denis Crowder for preparing this translation:

**MUNICIPAL THEATRE**

**KOANGA**

Opera in Three Acts with Prologue and Epilogue

by Frederick Delius

First Performance

Elberfeld, 31 March 1904

'Frederick Delius, whose opera *Koanga* was given its first performance here yesterday, a benefit performance for our generally admired opera producer Jacques Goldberg, is no stranger here: he is known as a "modern" composer in our concert hall through orchestral works performed under the baton of the principal conductor, Dr Haym; his most important work, *Paris* (a nocturne), which is classified as programme music, received its first performance here in 1902. *Koanga* provided an opportunity to get to know him as a composer for the stage as well.

'While this opera's principal merit from the *scenic* point of view lies in the true-to-life portrayal of ordinary people, the scenes featuring the slaves, the negro milieu, from the *musical* point of view, at first hearing, it lies in the orchestral colour, some of which is quite distinctive, and in the depiction of mood; in this respect the music has a fair amount of admirable detail to offer. For that matter Delius, like all the "moderns", puts the main emphasis on the orchestra, follows stylistically in the footsteps of Wagner and the Italian veristi, and with his sensitivity, as is the case with Le Borne in *Mudarra*,11 turns their achievements to account, while at the same time, like Charpentier, also going his own way: it is not just a matter of following or imitating the

style of Wagner. Moreover, while the composer’s motifs may not appear new, nevertheless because of his gift for combination he manages to give them new expression. With the “moderns”, as with Delius, complete mastery of technical resources is taken for granted, in the same way as dissonances, hence the singers too can indulge in these, as yesterday - especially given the secondary and instrumental treatment which vocal parts receive in the work of our “moderns”, and in Delius too. In Koanga what we particularly feel the lack of is melodic writing for normally constructed ears, as well as appropriate pauses and real climaxes. Then again there is much that seems excessively lengthy and in need of cutting. The quintet at the end of Act I bore witness to outstanding aptitude for fine musical craftsmanship and effective heightening of tension; the wedding music (ballet and chorus) in Act II seemed original and full of merit; the death scene also contains much that is appealing.

‘While at yesterday’s performance the house was only moderately well filled, for a benefit that was not surprising - especially in Holy Week - in the light of experience with previous first performances of operas here; success has often been “contrived”, regardless of whether the production in question may have brought the operatic art form into disrepute with a good many reasonable people. That ultimately makes the public distrustful. For the success of this performance of Koanga special credit was due to the producer Jacques Goldberg, in whose honour on this occasion it was held and who displayed all his professional skill, presenting scenes full of brilliant colour, lively movement and plenty of atmosphere, and to the conductor Fritz Cassirer, who had obviously devoted a great deal of loving care to the work, directed the performance very capably and in particular achieved a really excellent standard of orchestral playing. The changes of scene were admittedly too noisy and much too slow for the progress of the action, and the intervals were too long. As for the two leading roles, Clarence Whitehill as Koanga gave a splendid and quite outstanding performance: his resonant and powerful voice was particularly well suited to the long-drawn-out melancholy notes of the passionate “noble” slave. Rose Kaiser, too, in the extensive but not very rewarding part of Palmyra, gave an excellent performance to the extent that this was required. In minor roles Georg Foerster (Perez) and Max Birkholz (Don Martinez) gave commendable performances.

‘Devotees of the composer – who was present - gave the work a very cordial reception and saw to it that there was no shortage of ovations. In general yesterday there were bouquets and laurel wreaths in abundance and of all dimensions. After Act II there were repeated curtain calls for the laurel-crowned composer, amid loud applause. and at the end of the performance for the producer - the happy recipient of flowers, laurels and other tributes on his benefit night – and for the conductor.’
The first extended accounts of Delius and his music were published in German by Max Chop, both in his contribution to the second volume of the publisher C F Kahnt’s *Monographien Moderner Musiker* series in 1907 and in the ‘Harmonie’ series ‘Moderne Musiker’ to which he contributed a 58-page monograph. Chop clearly heard the early German performances of Delius’s music, including the Elberfeld production of *Koanga*, about which he writes with the vividness of first-hand experience:\(^1\)

‘The musical drama *Koanga* (first performed in the town theatre of Elberfeld on 30 March 1904) with its scenes of Negro life is Delius’s first attempt as a painter of middle-American land and people scapes. He portrays with ease all the impressions gained during his stay on the Florida orange plantation. In this area, Nature in all her tropical luxuriance surrounds the life and activities of the Negro. Delius loved it. Even (today) much later he retained fond memories of the time he was brought into daily contact with the blacks, and the wonderful evenings when their four-part unique improvised singing filled the still air around the ranch, while fireflies hummed through the long palm fronds and the breeze rustled the magnolias. These are mood pictures that stem absolutely from the power of his expression.

‘The colourful scenery was of course intimately bound up with the plot. The writer C F Keary used the novel by the American author G W Cable and placed at the centre of the whole thing the situation of slavery in the southern states of the USA at the turn of the century. The division between blacks and whites forms the conflict of the drama. The hatred held by the coloured people towards those with pale faces is deep rooted; the differences between the two races are furthered by the half-castes, who only slightly belie their roots by their appearance. Marriage between blacks and whites is held to be impossible and any descendants are despised by the whites and excluded from any part of their business. The basic themes become obvious from the summary of the plot that follows.

‘In the introduction a number of young girls, daughters of rich Louisiana plantation owners, are dancing one beautiful spring evening. They soon tire and search for alternative entertainment. The Negroes with their exuberant imaginations are good story-tellers, so old “Uncle Joe” with his stories of slavery and the desire for freedom is called. He begins the story of *Koanga*, a prince and voodoo priest, and Palmyra. Dusk falls and dark clouds form on the horizon as the tale becomes reality before the eyes of the spectators. Voodoo is the God of the African Negro, and belief remained strong amongst all Negroes; even those who outwardly subscribed to Christianity held to the old ways with all the tenacity of their people. This explains why the curse that *Koanga* puts on the whole plantation at the end of the second act is fulfilled: the strength of hypnosis and autosuggestion.

The first act begins on the plantation of the rich Don José Martinez at daybreak. Male and female slaves are working in the sugar cane and indigo fields under the whip hand of Perez the overseer: a half-breed. We are also introduced to Palmyra, a beautiful mulatto who owes her special position in the household to the fact that she is half-sister of Martinez’ wife. She is pursued by the attentions of Perez. A new slave is brought in in chains: Koanga. Descended from the aristocratic Sudanese people, he does not want to work and cannot be brought to heel by the whip. Martinez has the idea of using Palmyra’s beauty to work on his stubbornness. Koanga, sunk in memories of his homeland, recognises in Palmyra a shared ancestry and, deeply moved by the encounter, promises obedience if she will become his wife. Martinez grants this demand and thus arouses not only the anger of Perez, who loves Palmyra, but also the protest of his own wife, Clothilde, who sees the marriage of a Negro to a Christian mulatto as a degradation to her half-sister. As Martinez reaches his decision, Koanga and Palmyra realise they are in love.

The second act begins with the wedding festivities characterised by an atmosphere typical of southern lands. Clothilde and Perez scheme to frustrate the hated union. Perez decides that he will use violence if peaceful methods are not successful. He approaches Palmyra but his advances are once again rejected, so in revenge he has the girl dragged away by white servants before Koanga’s eyes. His feelings doubled by the effects of wine, Koanga demands satisfaction from Martinez who is outraged at the proud tone of his slave and declares he should be flogged. Koanga then kills his master with one blow. Before fleeing into the jungle, he places the most powerful voodoo curse on the plantation.

The third act begins in a clearing in the jungle where Negroes are dancing wildly around a sacrificial bonfire. Koanga is the lord of these poor escaped slaves and has promised them freedom and a return to their homeland. During a prayer to Voodoo, he has a vision of Palmyra, ill with desire and longing for him, and nothing can then stop him returning to her. The scene returns to Martinez’ plantation. The voodoo curse has had effect: fever has mown down the Negro population. Hard-hearted Perez tries in vain to force them to work, ignoring the sickly requests of the dying that he reconcile himself with Koanga and thus raise the curse. He forms a posse to hunt the escapee and again approaches the weak and feeble Palmyra and attempts to force his attentions on her. Koanga reappears armed with a spear and strikes Perez down, only to have himself caught by the whites and whipped to death. Dying, he is brought before Palmyra; with a wish for his homeland and a curse for his tormentors, his life ends. Palmyra, too, yields to death. Clouds sink on the scene and we notice “Uncle Joe” in the foreground and the circle of deeply moved girls.

Delius has written a score to this story with its richly diverse elements which leaves such a lasting effect. It is a tapestry of individual pictures each with a compelling strength that deepens the meaning and intensity of each situation. One can sense that he puts his whole soul into the work and it is not without an effect on him. The
musical colours are masterly from the first sounds of the dawn with the notes of cowhorns and chorus behind the scenes. Also at the entrance of the melancholy Koanga, thinking of his far-off homeland, and Palmyra, remembering her childhood, sympathy is aroused towards the singers. The action leads then to a climax with the quintet as opinions clash: simply a masterpiece in the whole drama. Wonderfully moving passages stand by sharply defined shapes but all sit together musically. The beginning of the second act contrasts the joyful wedding sounds in the background with the sinister weavings of intrigue in the foreground. The violent seduction of Palmyra and the tragic fight between Koanga and Martinez lead to the gripping climax of the voodoo curse. That the later jungle atmosphere with the fantastic negro dancing is masterfully portrayed goes without saying. Throughout all the luxuriant and resonant style of the composition, Delius is careful to keep the substance of the plot in mind and restrain any tendency to ramble. The musical construction of the end of the second act is an excellent example of this.

'Such judgements were shared by the critics after the premiere. Paul Hiller-Köln wrote the following: "It almost seems as though the strong, colourful elements of the blooming tropics have borne fruit in the musical nature created by Delius. He emerges as an excellent colourist and uses all the opportunities: milieu, customs, symbolic songs and joyful dances, including a semi-mystical sacrificial dance of fleeing Negroes, to paint musically. That is one of his strengths; another is his strong sense of the dramatic. The tragedy of the couple creates an arresting impression, yet it stands firmly on modern ground, familiar with all means offered by today's orchestral apparatus, creating beautifully lyrical songs and imposing ensembles." Seldom is a composer greeted with such a reception on his first venture as a dramatist.'

(translated by Julia Chandler)

_A Village Romeo and Juliet_ was produced in Berlin under Cassirer's baton on 21 February 1907, and Beecham reported in his book on the composer how both had won either the admiration or aroused the interest of many of the leading German musicians of the day, such as Strauss, Humperdinck, Schillings and Mottl. Was the entrance door to opportunity and recognition to be barred against him here? . . . The most obvious choice was _A Village Romeo and Juliet_ whose maturity of style would make it preferable to the earlier _Koanga . . . _13

After this, _Koanga_ was largely forgotten, at least in performance, until Beecham recorded the closing scene in December 1934, put it into a concert at the Hastings Festival on 23 February 1935, and this presumably confirmed his intention to promote a stage production which followed at Covent Garden immediately after the summer, the first performance being on 23 September, the first of three. With Beecham conducting _Der Freischütz_ and the Delius, the company then took an extensive repertoire to Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford and Leeds.

13. Beecham, Sir Thomas: _Frederick Delius_, Hutchinson, 1959, p.156
WORKING TOWARDS THE 1935 PRODUCTION

The full score and parts of the music of Koanga were lost for many years, during which time performances were not possible. Subsequently the score was tracked down by the composer Patrick Hadley, who recounted, in a letter to Christopher Palmer, how he traced it:

‘There is not much to tell about my running to earth the score of Koanga. I had been staying at Grez where I managed to elicit all the remembered data about when & where it was last seen et cetera. I forget most of the details but I do remember putting two & two together and putting the chances fairly high that it might be amongst the extensive stock of the Goodwin & Tabb Hire Library. I happened to be in constant touch with this Firm & its personnel so on return to London I hastened to 34 Percy Street WC1, their then premises, and expatiated the situation. They wouldn’t let me search in person but they put 2 or 3 men onto it who laid their hands on it after a weekend’s hunt. I post-hasted over by that night’s boat and delivered it the following mid-day.’

Palmer’s discussion of the opera, touching interestingly on the cuttings which follow here, highlights the opera’s problems for a late 20th century audience. Delius was unaware of Cable’s social conscience and used Cable’s episode to provide a picturesque atmospheric drama. ‘With a new libretto, restoring Cable’s intent, Koanga might have just the effect that Delius in 1894 thought opera capable of – working by means of music upon people who are tired of being preached to.’

In November 1932, the critic Edwin Evans wrote to Delius asking about the background to Koanga, and the reply which Jelka Delius wrote gives us a fair view of the opera as Delius remembered it at the end of his life. I am grateful to Lionel Carley for providing a transcript of the text established by Evelin Gerhardi in 1991:

Dear Mr Evans, My husband asked me to give you the required information about Koanga. I have jotted down just anyhow all that I could tell you on the subject after questioning Delius about it.

I only hope you will be able to use it. I found it quite impossible to tell the drama in detail; I hope the indications I gave will suffice.

If there is anything else you want, I shall be glad to answer more questions.

Delius is fairly well and sends you his kind regards.

Yrs sincerely

Jelka Delius

15. ibid.
The Opera Koanga was composed 1895-1897. The Scenario is by Delius himself; it is taken from Cable's Grandissimes. The words are by C. F. Keary.

The story is the tragedy of an African Negro-prince brought to a Louisianian plantation as a slave. It forms the 3 acts. But there is a prologue and an epilogue on the Verandah of a southern plantation, long after slaves were abolished. The young girls have played and danced till they are tired and then they ask an old Negro "Uncle Joe" to tell them a tale. He tells them the story of Koanga, a Voodoo prince captured in Africa with other slaves, who refuses to work as a slave. The slave owner gets the beautiful mulatto girl, his natural daughter, but through her mother's tribe, to tempt him to submission. The slave-owner even promises her to him as his wife, if he will work. Negroes go in and out working and singing, real old slave-life.

The 2d Act. The wedding feast, dancing and merry feasting. Palmyre is greatly attracted to Koanga, but the Slave-owner's wife will not hear of such a marriage and Palmyre is spirited away. Koanga claims his bride and when he sees that they have cheated him he pronounces a terrible curse on the plantation and escapes into the wild swamps.

3d Act. Incantations to Voodoo at night in the swamps. Koanga and runaway Negroes. His love for Palmyre makes him return finally to fetch her away from the feverstricken plantation. He is captured and killed and Palmyre stabs herself and dies with him.

Then comes the Epilogue, or closing scene, which is to be given in the concert. We return to the modern plantation. The girls are still sitting round Uncle Joe; they are saddened by the sad story he has told them. It is dawn now and a beautiful May morning and the chorus of charming young girls full of sympathy ends the opera.

The subject attracted Delius after his lonely life on his own orange grove in Florida, where he occupied negro-workers who's harmonious improvised singing in the evenings made a great impression on him. Appalachia also dates from those impressions.

Koanga was performed at the Opera house at Elberfeld in 1904, where Gregor was director then, who afterwards was for years director of the Vienna Opera. Fritz Cassirer was conductor. The Production was so successful that Gregor who had just acquired the "Komische Oper" in Berlin took the young Cassirer with him to Berlin, where he presently brought out The Village Romeo Juliet, intending to mount Koanga afterwards. But unfortunately he went bankrupt and his theatre was closed.

In Elberfeld Clarence Whitehill sang Koanga, and very well indeed. It was a very vivid and colourful production altogether and was played a number of times until the season closed, and with it Gregor's stay at Elberfeld.

The Score and parts of Koanga were brought over to London at the beginning of the war and were lost for years. After endless vain searchings Philip Heseltine rediscovered at least the orchestral parts in 1929 and the Orchestral score was finally found in the Cellars of a Music
When the first volume of the Delius Society records appeared just after Christmas 1934, including the closing scene from *Koanga*, the reception in the reception in the 'cellos and later encircling the brief girls' chorus: sung in other time he is heard Leon Goossens' oboe-playing is almost unbearably second side (Ex.3) with the well-known tune in the same key from the slow qualification.

'The 3rd Act and closing scene of *Koanga* was the first thing Delius wrote in Grez.'

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When the first volume of the Delius Society records appeared just after Christmas 1934, including the closing scene from *Koanga*, the reception in the *Gramophone* was an exploration of terra incognita.

In his excellent 'Foreword' Mr A K Holland speaks of Delius's romanticism as 'English, mystical and nature-loving'. I am not wholly in agreement with this definition and the word 'mystical' needs a great deal of qualification. It has always been a trap. Perhaps Mr Holland will expand his definition some day. I will add to his full and accomplished notes only a few general remarks about each work.

*Koanga*. Closing Scene.

There is a most appealing melodic freshness in this music, which finds a culminating point in the haunting tune (Ex.2 in the Foreword) first heard on the 'cellos and later encircling the brief girls' chorus: sung in rather a woolly way and without sufficient definition.

To appreciate Delius's harmonic subtlety, even in these early days, it is only necessary to compare, without prejudice, the tune opening on the second side (Ex.3) with the well-known tune in the same key from the slow movement of Dvorak's 'New World' Symphony. (On this record and every other time he is heard Leon Goossens' oboe-playing is almost unbearably beautiful.)

Hitherto I have never been able to consider myself a devotee of Delius, and those who love and admire his music love it so passionately and admire it so uncritically that anything which savours to them of the least denigration has an almost infuriating effect. Consequently when I say that the publication in recorded form of works both from Delius’s earlier and later phases has only strengthened my conviction that he is not the great composer his devotees believe him to be, I know that I have let myself in for a more argumentative mail than ever. The first disc consists of the closing scene from Koanga which was Delius’s third opera written in the ’nineties and first produced in 1904. The setting is a Louisiana plantation, the drama one of negro slave-life. It happened that when I first played over this disc I could not find the booklet with Mr A K Holland’s exegesis, and I was left to speculate with what kind of people and what part of the world the opera was concerned. I finally decided it must be an opera about the South Seas, my guess being determined more by the name than by the music. It is a pleasant enough exercise in gentle melancholy, but I cannot discover in it the remotest expression of slave-life in Louisiana, though, to be sure, it might have puzzled any composer to attach the expression of anything to such words as these:

Now once more both fields and farm
His rays with gold adorning,
For all lost lovers let us truly pray,
This soft May morning.

If the sins of the librettist were to be charged against the composer, not a composer would escape condemnation, but it is difficult to resist the suspicion that Delius’s whole treatment of this closing scene was coloured by that ‘soft May morning’. By succumbing to the peculiar temptation, it seems to me that Delius sacrificed his opera, as in my opinion he sacrificed all his music, to his own emotional self-indulgence.

(Compton Mackenzie, Gramophone, April 1935, p.423)

THE 1935 COVENT GARDEN PRODUCTION

At the time of the revival of Koanga, Eric Fenby was still working on his book Delius as I knew him, which appeared the following year. The accounts of Delius and his music that he wrote to introduce the opera were therefore both pioneering and authentic as far as their audience was concerned. For the broadcast he wrote an introductory piece for the Radio Times, gave the interval talk during the broadcast, and a few weeks later contributed an article to the Daily Telegraph on Delius’s early music, interest in which had been stimulated by Koanga. They are all reproduced here. As was their custom, the Radio Times illustrated both Fenby’s article and their billing for the opera, and these are also reproduced here.
KOANGA

A Talk by Mr Eric Fenby
National Programme Monday 23 September 1935

I hope it will interest you on this occasion to hear something about Frederick Delius and the circumstances under which he composed his opera Koanga. The Frederick Delius that I should like to talk to you about for a few minutes is not the tragic figure and relic of a man most of you have come to know by the awful photographs taken of him during the last years of his life, nor the Delius some of you saw in the flesh when he came over to attend the festival of his music given in his honour by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1929; - no, I want you to forget all this, and allow me to give you some idea of the sort of man he was at the time of the composition of Koanga - I mean the Delius of the late nineties.

Judging by one or two unpublished photographs taken about this time, and by chance remarks made by the composer to me when I caught him in reminiscent mood, I am able to piece together a picture of him in those days, a necessarily imperfect picture. of course, but a picture by which I should prefer you to remember him; for the picture by which he is most likely to be remembered is but the shadow of the man. Now Delius must have been a tall, handsome young fellow, aristocratic in bearing, meticulous in dress, fond of sports - he was a very keen cricketer, a good change bowler and useful 'bat' and often played for an English XI in Paris.

He had done what I too had done as a small boy; gone to the Scarborough Cricket Festival, and sat on the cheap benches with his sandwiches and his bottle of 'pop', and even in his old age his interest in the game did not wane. When he used to be brought downstairs before lunch he would send for me to read the latest scores and to wheel him round the garden in his chair and discuss the prospects of the various teams, particularly at Test Match times. He must have been a very wilful, restless, self-centred young man; very sure of himself - a man who knew all there is to be known about food, about wine, and, to complete the delectable trinity - the fair sex!

A prodigious reader, a stimulating and entertaining talker with a dry wit curiously his own, often, I am sure, a very trying companion - in short, a most unusual young man.

I have mentioned his restlessness. The moment he had finished his work he would rush off for a long walk, or a long cycle ride, or a strenuous holiday climbing mountains in Norway, and thirty years later with blindness and paralysis fast creeping upon him, he insisted on being carried up a high mountain in Norway to see the marvellous sunset on the great hills in the distance. Percy Grainger helped by Mrs Delius and two servants bore the brunt of that seven hours’ ascent, and then as they neared the summit it all seemed in vain, for clouds obscured the view. But at the great moment, the clouds dispersed, Delius revelled in his sunset, and, within a few minutes, a dense mist settled over the scene, and they began the perilous descent.
This little incident will also reveal something of the youthful grip on life which was manifest so often in his old age. But we are concerned with the young Delius, the young composer who set to work on the score of Koanga. He had contemplated the idea of writing a Negro opera for some considerable time and even tried to make his own libretto. It will be remembered that his previous attempts in this direction had failed, and that consequently he had wasted a good deal of beautiful music, particularly in the case of Irmelin, his first opera, in which much of the music has an unmistakable charm and freshness about it. I shall refer to Irmelin for a moment later on. Delius realised by now that he had neither the time nor the necessary literary gift for such thankless tasks. What was more natural than that he should commission his friend Keary, with whom he shared a flat in Paris, to make a libretto for him?

Keary, already at work on it, had gone down to the country, and was staying at a little village near Fontainebleau called Bourron, about twenty minutes’ walk over the fields from Grez, the village where Delius was to settle down for life the following year. When the 'book' for the first act was completed, Keary sent for Delius, who was then in Paris, asking him to come to Bourron on the next day to read it through. Trivial though it may seem this incident influenced the whole course of the composer’s life.

It must be explained that shortly before this, Delius had met a young painter, Jelka Rosen, at the home of a mutual friend in Paris where the young woman had come to study painting. Miss Rosen appeared to be very enthusiastic about Delius’s music and not a little solicitous for his future well-being. Delius had confided in her that as his father had refused to make him a small allowance on which to live, and thus devote himself entirely to composition, he would have to earn his living by teaching. All his creative inspirations would come to nought! However he was able to jog along for the time being thanks to the generosity of an uncle in Paris. Miss Rosen was now in Grez staying with her girl friend Ida Gerhardi, another young painter, at the Hotel Chevillon, then a great rendezvous for artists, and hearing that Delius was at Bourron with Keary, she invited him over to lunch. It was a lovely summer’s day, and those of you who have not seen Grez on such a day can hardly realise anything of the beauty of the old church, the light on the lines of poplars, the plain edged by a distant stretch of the wood. Robert Louis Stevenson has described it beautifully somewhere in his writings, but I am away from my books and cannot remember the passage.16 The young couple took a boat from the hotel landing-stage, and going under the bridge landed and walked up what appeared to be an overgrown garden. Skirting the pond they eventually found themselves in the courtyard of a rambling house looking onto the street. The young woman, with astonishing intuition, decided that this was the very place for Delius to work in. There he could concentrate

16. ‘Forest notes’ chapter in Essays of Travel, London, 1905. See also Christopher Redwood’s article ‘Grez before Delius’, Delius Society Newsletter 42.
undisturbed to his heart’s content, and from that moment she resolved that by hook or by crook she would buy that property. Meanwhile Delius returned to Paris and worked hard on the first act of *Koanga*. It was his habit in those days to work through the night and sleep during the day. He used to tell me that he smoked incessantly as he worked, that a bottle of red wine was never far out of elbow’s reach, and how sometimes he would leave his work in the middle of the night and steal out for a chat at some café table with his painter friends. Much interesting correspondence passed between Delius and Keary on the subject of the libretto. Delius all the while complaining that Keary’s words were too ‘high-flown’. The music for Act 11 was finished by the end of that year, 1896, and in the New Year Delius decided to return to Florida for a few months to put his orange-grove in order. Keary, having completed the libretto, handed over the last act to the composer who wrote the greater part of the music for it on that second visit to Florida. Miss Rosen, in Delius’s absence and unknown to him, had persuaded her mother to buy the property at Grez. She was now installed there, but had had little or no news of Delius. However, the day after he returned to Paris from Florida she received a postcard announcing his intention of coming down for the week-end! From that week-end Grez became his home and it was here that *Koanga* was completed and all his finest music conceived.

As you have been told, Sir Thomas Beecham is performing the opera in two instead of three acts. That is to say Act 11 becomes Scene 11 of Act 1, and Act 111 becomes Act 11. For the purposes of this production Sir Thomas has found it necessary to interpolate two little unpublished pieces. The first you will hear before this next act. It is an extract from a suite *Florida* written in 1889 from which Delius borrowed the theme for the merry-making scene at the wedding feast of Koanga and Palmyra. Perhaps you will be able to catch the words?

*Dansons la Calinda. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.*

Now the second piece will be played in the last act, after the vision of Don José’s plantation fades away, and the scenery is changed. It is a charming little flight for small orchestra which Delius dictated to me and which he developed from a few musical ideas that particularly appealed to him in his very early opera *Irmelin*. It therefore receives its first performance tonight. You will easily recognise it as it clears away the somewhat depressing atmosphere created by the music for the long-drawn out scene at the beginning of the third act – a swamp in the heart of the forest where Koanga has established himself as chieftain of fugitive slaves.

Now I will leave someone else to tell you something about the next act…

17. The reader is also referred to Jelka Delius’s ‘Memories of Frederick Delius’. Appendix VII in Lionel Carley’s *Delius: A Life in Letters Vol 1*, pp.408-415.
National Programme

DROITWICH
200 kc/s 1,500 m.

LONDON
1,149 kc/s 261.1 m.

WEST
1,149 kc/s 261 m.

First performance in England of

An Opera by Frederick Delius

Relayed from the
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Radio Times, 20 September 1935, p.28
THE STORY OF KOANGA

upon which Delius based his opera, is here told by Eric Fraby, who worked with Delius as his amanuensis during the last years of the composer's life. The first performance in England of "Koanga" will be relayed from Covent Garden on Monday.

The novelty of the short season of Opera to be given this autumn at Covent Garden and afterwards in the provinces is Delius's third opera, Koanga, which is to receive its first performance in English. It was composed between 1895-1897, and after repeated efforts to interest people in its production in London, Delius returned home to France, disheartened and discouraged. Koanga was eventually performed in Elberfeld in 1904 under the direction of Fritz Cassirer, and was greatly enjoyed by the townsfolk there, especially by the small children who acted as piccaninnies. The only serious criticism came from their parents, who complained bitterly of the havoc caused by black grease-paint on tiny garments, and on one occasion the performance was held up for a considerable time by a deputation of infuriated mothers.

Delius had written his own librettto for his first two operas, Irminia and The Magic Fountain, but, realising by now that he had neither the time nor the literary gift for such thankless tasks, he commissioned his friend C. F. Keary to make a librettto from Cable's novel of Creole life, The Grandissimes — selecting the story of Koanga as the basis of his opera. It will be remembered that Delius had lived as an orange planter in Florida from 1884 to 1886, and to the end of his days he used to talk about the wonderful instinctive feeling for harmony possessed by the Negroes, and how he used to sit on his verandah far into the night smoking cigar after cigar as he listened to their subtle improvisations in harmony. In the meantime Delius had returned to Europe to study, and it was not until January, 1897, that he decided to go out to Florida again, this time not to seek solitude, but to put his estate in order, for the Negro in charge of it had gifts for pocketing Delius' profits that far outshone the Negro's excellent gift for music. It was on this second visit that much of the music for Koanga was composed.

The scene of the prologue is a typical southern orange grove. It is evening and dancing is going on in the house. Four young girls, Renée, Hélène, Auréole, and Olive, tired of dancing and playing all day, beg Uncle Joe, an old Negro slave, to tell one of his stories. They are joined by Jeanne, Marie, Hortense, and Paullette, and all sit round the old man whilst he tells them the story of Koanga and Palmyra. Clouds descend and cover the stage, and after a brief orchestral interlude they clear away gradually and disclose the garden of a plantation in Louisiana, with slave huts and distant fields of sugar-cane, edged by a stretch of the forest. It is dawn and the beginning of yet another day in the life of a slave.

Act One. Palmyra, the beautiful half-caste maid of Clotilda, wife of the planter Don José Martinez, but really the natural daughter of Clotilda's father, is sad and lonely and her thoughts are interrupted by the call of the cow-horn summoning the slaves to their work, and by the appearance of Simon Perez, the detested slave-driver whose repeated advances make her life intolerable. The slaves, half asleep, appear at the hut door, the lazy ones are roused with the whip, and soon they are off to their work, singing in unison as they go:

Come out, niggers, come out to cut the waving cane,
The moonlight shadows are fused and the day is back again,
The humming-bird is waking, good niggers don't complain,
So come once more and hasten to the fields of sugar-cane.
Perez persists in his love-making, and from the fields the same chorus is heard, now in harmony. Palmyra is about to go, when Don José comes upon the scene. He complains that the last hand of slaves was hardly worth the whip; Perez replies that this time they have sent a splendid prize: a noble warrior of ancient race, a prince of his realm. Don José orders him to be brought before him. Koanga enters, in chains, guarded by two Negroes. He calls upon his fathers from the grave to revenge him and heaps curses upon those who have made him captive. No more will he see "the slow Inanga River, nor the wide, shady forest where the serpent crawls at ease, nor hear again the arrow speeding home". He vows that he will die rather than be a slave. Don José threatens to use the whip, and Palmyra cries out in horror, recognizing in Koanga the signs of a Jollof Prince and Voodoo priest. This for the first time draws the attention of her master to Palmyra, and he entices her to use a "woman's wiles" to subdue him. She talks. Something of the past awakens in her, and almost in spite of herself, offers to share Koanga's fate if he will "bow his back". To Perez's chagrin, her charm works too well and Koanga agrees.

Act Two opens with the negresses celebrating their Master's birthday and the wedding day of Koanga and Palmyra. Clotilda, unable to bear the thought of Palmyra being given in marriage to a pagan, she has brought up the girl as a Christian. She tries her best to dissuade her, and Perez, mad with jealousy, kidnap Palmyra with the aid of a few servants during the merry-making. Koanga, astonished and enraged, demands his bride from the indignant Don José. They fight; the planter falls to the ground, and Koanga, calling upon Voodoo to rain his curses on the plantation, escapes into the forest.

Act Three opens in the heart of the forest. Koanga has established himself as the Chief of the fugitive slaves. A sacrifice is prepared, the dark forms dance around the fire, gashing themselves with knives. The fire dies down, Koanga prays to Voodoo and a vision of Don José's plantation appears. Aind the dying slaves he sees Palmyra and hears her cries of distress. He returns to the accused plantation and, finding Perez importing the unhappy Palmyra, he slays him, and himself done to death by the spears of Don José's men. Palmyra, overcome, stabs herself. The Epilogue brings us back to Uncle Joe and the girls listening to his story.

W. L. Streeton and a Record

W. L. Streeton, that pillar of the "His Master's Voice" artists' department, tells me that he has created something approaching a speed record with the issue of John Brownlee's two titles from "The Private Life of Don Juan."

John Brownlee, hitherto a concert singer, is playing in that screen success, "Don Juan," with Douglas Fairbanks. W. L. S. is first class at spotting winners, and he decided that Brownlee's songs were too good to miss, so a record was made the day after the première of the film, rushed to Hayes to be pressed, and was on sale and reaching "best seller figures within a week!

The above extract from The Gramophone, October 1934, may explain Beecham's choice in casting the role of Koanga. The following extract comes from the same issue.
Columbia Take Over the Delius Society

As I forecast last month, the negotiations between the Committee of the Delius Society and Columbia, which began in April, have at last been completed.

The original Committee of the Delius Society has resigned and now and henceforward this enterprise will be run under the auspices of Columbia, although, as everyone will be pleased to hear, Sir Thomas Beecham remains President and Artistic Advisor.

The change-over has resulted in a considerable improvement in the contents of the first album. Instead of the songs that were announced in company with "Paris," it has been decided to record "Eventyr," Ballad for Orchestra, the final scene from the unpublished opera, "Koanga," and the Serenade and Finale from "Hassan."

Columbia are putting all these good eggs into the Delius basket for two reasons: firstly as a mark of respect to the memory of the great composer, and secondly because they hope that their enterprise will be rewarded by a great influx of subscriptions.

Sir Thomas has written a special message to the British musical public asking for more support, to the tune of 750 new subscribers, and this message has been incorporated in a new prospectus that is now obtainable from all Columbia dealers.

What

Sir Thomas Beecham

looks like when seen by Quirk (We tremble to think what Quirk will look like when he has been seen by Sir Thomas).
THE YOUNG DELIUS

AN IDYLL OF THE 'NINETIES

By ERIC FENBY

THE Frederick Delius existing in most people's minds is the tragic figure and hero of a man represented by the wonderful photographs taken of him during the last years of his life. This was the Delius whom Londonderry saw in the flesh when he came over from France to attend the festival of his music given in his honour by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1929.

I want here to give some idea of the man he was at the time of the composition of "Koanga." I mean the Delius of the late nineties.

To judge by one or two unpublished photographs taken about that time, and by chance remarks made by the composer to me with but a snippet or reminiscence here and there, I am able to piecemeal together a picture of him in those days, a necessarily imperfect picture, but one by which I should prefer him to be remembered, for the picture by which he is most likely to be remembered is but the shadow of the man.

Delius must have been a tall, handsome young fellow, aristocratic in bearing, meticulous in dress, fond of sports—he was a very keen cricketer and often played for an English XI. in Paris. He must have been a very wilful, restless, self-centred young man—very sure of himself—a man who knew all there was to be known about food and wine, not to speak of the fair sex. A prodigious reader, a stimulating and entertaining talker with a dry wit curiously his own; often, I am sure, a very trying companion—in short, a most unusual young man.

* * *

As a young musician he knew his Wagner inside out, and worshipped Chopin, Grieg and Bizet—particularly the delicacy of the latter's scoring—and if, at times, he found himself writing music coloured by theirs he did not mind, for he believed in working through his influences, not avoiding them. His was a slow development, and he had to dig very deep for his musical gold. Such, then, was the young composer who set to work on the score of "Koanga."

He had contemplated the writing of a negro opera for a long time, and, finding a subject that suited him in C. W. Stoddard's novel, "The Grandissimes," he even tried to make his own libretto. His previous attempts in this direction had failed, and consequently he had wasted a good deal of beautiful music, particularly in the case of "Irminen," his first opera, in which much of the music has unmistakable charm and freshness. Those who saw "Koanga" at Covent Garden will remember a charming little piece for orchestra, which Sir Thomas found it necessary to interpolate during a change of scenery. This was an unpublished prelude which Delius dictated to me, developing it from a few musical ideas that he had always liked in that very early opera "Irminen."

Delius, however, came to the point of seeing that he had neither the time nor the literary gift for the task of making his own libretto, and he therefore turned to his friend Korey, with whom he shared a flat in Paris, to write it for him. Korey set to work on it at a little village near Fontainebleau called Bourron, 20 minutes' walk over the fields from Grez, the village where Delius was in the following year to settle down for life. When the book of the first act was completed, Korey sent for Delius, who was in Paris, asking him to come to Bourron the next day to read it through. Trivial though it may seem, this incident influenced the whole course of the composer's life.

* * *

It must be explained that shortly before this, Delius had met a young painter, Ella Rosen, who appeared to be very enthusiastic about his music and not a little solicitous for his future well-being. Delius had confided to her that, his father having refused to make him an allowance to enable him to devote himself to composition, he would have to earn his living by teaching.

Miss Rosen was now at Grez, staying with her friend Isidore Gerhardt, another young painter, at the Hotel Cheysson, then a great rendezvous for artists; and hearing that Delius was at Bourron with Koery, she invited him over to lunch. It was a lovely summer day, and those who have not seen Grez such a day cannot realize the beauty of the old church, the ruin, the gardens going down in terraces to the river, the old bridge, the light on the lines of poplars, the plain edge by a distant stretch of the wood. The young couple took a boat from the hotel landing-stage and, going under the bridge, landed and walked up what appeared to be an overgrown garden. Skirting the pond they eventually found themselves in the courtyard of a rambling house looking on to the street. The young woman, with prompt intuition, decided that this was the very place for Delius to work in, and from that moment she resolved that by hook or crook she would buy the property.

Meanwhile Delius returned to Paris and
worked hard on the first act of "Koanga." It was his habit in those days to work through the night and sleep during the day. He used to tell me that he smoked incessantly as he worked, that a bottle of red wine was never out of reach, and that he sometimes would leave his work in the middle of the night and steal out for a chat at some cafe table with his painter friends.

The music for Act II, was finished by the end of 1890, and at the New Year Delius decided to return to Florida for a few months to put his opera Grove in order. Keenly desirous of completing the libretto, he hurried over the last set to the composer who wrote the greater part of the music for it on that second visit to Florida.

Miss Rosen, in Delius’s absence, and unknown to him, had persuaded his mother to buy her the property at Gruy. She was now installed there, but had had little or no news of Delius. However, the day after he returned from Florida she received a postcard announcing his intention of coming down for the week end. From that week end Gruy became his home, and it was there that "Koanga" was completed and all its finest music conceived.

Delius had set his heart on a first performance of the opera in London, but after repeated efforts to interest people in its production, he returned home to France disappointed and discouraged. The composer had to wait seven years before "Koanga" was eventually performed in Germany, at Elberfeld, in 1904.

To judge by the number of mistakes in the autograph score—wrong notes, missing accidentals, misjudgments in the dynamic markings, all of which had been faithfully copied into the orchestral parts and not corrected at the rehearsals—those Elberfeld performances must have been pretty bad. But Delius, inexperienced and, I understand, pathetically helpless at rehearsals, was too absorbed by the general effect produced by his music and too thrilled by the wonderful experience of at last hearing it on the orchestra to bother about details.

* * * * *

Delius believed that the composer, no less than the poet, has something to say about life. For him music was an outburst of the soul. He regarded life as a tragedy made livable by those rare moments of supreme happiness which come and go, never more to return. At the thought of the "never-more" music would well up within him, and a few words

"But my mate, no more, no more with me... We two together, no mate, no more"

a few words such as these, and often very unimportant words, would draw from him music of such intense feeling as to be almost unbearable.

In "Sea-drift," in "Songs of Sunset," "The Village Romeo and Juliet," "Cynara," "Songs of Farewell"—it is always the same—same longing for the perpetuation of impossible bliss, it mattered not whether it was an opera, a song, an orchestral or a chamber work: it was always the same longing that was uppermost in him, inspiring his finest conceptions.

Was it a coincidence that Delius's most cherished possession was Gauvreau's "Never More," which he bought direct from the painter? Delius was only interested in the story of Koanga and Palmyra in so far as the "never-more" was concerned; hence the complete lack of dramatic action, the absurd situations, and the naivete of his musical characterisations.

A detail or two about the incorporation of music of earlier date only interest the composer's admirers. The dance music in the second act was borrowed from an orchestral suite called "Florida," written in 1889. The original orchestration he retained throughout, and he added voice parts for Palmyra and the chorus to suit the jolly situation. The short prelude to Act III. Delius borrowed from his discarded opera "The Magic Fountain."


DELFIUS’
LIFE-LONG
WISH
FULFILLED

WHEN the opera "Koanga" is produced next Monday at Covent Garden—the first production in this country—one of Delius' long cherished ambitions will have come to pass.

The opera was inspired by the dead composer's earlier days as an orange planter in Florida, but until now technical difficulties—including that of finding a singer with more than the ordinary range of voice to take the part of Koanga—have prevented its appearance here.

Delius often urged Sir Thomas Beecham to stage it, and now he is to do so with John Brownlee, of the Paris Grand Opera, as Koanga. Madame Slobodskaya will play the heroine, Palmyra.

New scenery and costumes have been designed by Nicolas de Molas.

On Wednesday Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" will be given, and subsequently "Der Freischutz"—the first production at Covent Garden since 1907. On September 30 "Un Ballo in Maschera," which has not been heard there for many years, is to be staged.
THE COVENT GARDEN PERFORMANCES

The Covent Garden performances took place on 23rd and 27th September, and on 3rd October. The opera was performed in an atmosphere of, for the time, startling informality, and this is mentioned by several commentators. It is clear that the audience largely consisted of those who wished to hear the music and see the opera and not to be seen on the society circuit.

DELIRIUS'S: "KOANGA."

TO-NIGHT'S PERFORMANCE AT COVENT GARDEN

The fortnight's season of opera in English and Italian at Covent Garden will open to-night with the first performance in this country of Delius's Koanga. Sir Thomas Beecham will conduct, and the principal parts will be sung by Mr. John Brownlee and Miss Oda Slaboskaya.

PROBLEM OF DELIUS OPERA BROADCAST

39-YEARS-OLD WORK THAT HAS NOT BEEN HEARD IN ENGLAND BEFORE

THE B.B.C.'s ATTITUDE

From Our Wireless Correspondent

An opera that was written in 1896 by Frederick Delius, but has never been performed in this country, is to be reproduced at Covent Garden to-night under Sir Thomas Beecham's direction, and will be broadcast in its entirety.

This 39-years-old opera is "Koanga." At the age of 20 Delius ran away from a mercantile career to Florida, where he became an orange planter.

"Koanga" is set in these surroundings, and is a story of the orange plantations, of negro slaves, and of a slave-driver who was slain by the negro Koanga, reputed to be a negro prince and Voodoo priest.

At night Delius used to sit on the balcony of his house listening to the negroes singing. He often afterwards referred with admiration to their gift for impromptu harmonisation.

"Koanga" was first performed at Elberfeld in 1904. A Doubtful Point

This opera will occupy most of the National programme this evening. No doubt the B.B.C. would justify this commitment by the artistic importance of the occasion and by the fact that a varied alternative programme of light features is available on Regional, but whether the broadcasting of an entire opera such as this is justified by the number of people who can follow it on the radio is a doubtful point.

To start with, only a very few experts will know the opera in advance, and it is very difficult to follow the action of an opera over the radio unless one knows the story or there is a running commentary.

Secondly, there is a big cast of 15 principals, ten are women, whose voices in opera are never easy to identify over the radio.

Casual Treatment

If the B.B.C. were to employ a commentator to tell listeners what is happening on the stage these handicaps to opera listening might be overcome.

The B.B.C.'s handling of opera in the programmes continues to be casual, however. I have been trying to discover what plans are in hand for opera broadcasting during the winter, and whether any determined effort is to be made to solve the many problems connected with this side of broadcasting, but my inquiries have had a disappointing result.

No one at Broadcasting House seems to have thought of tackling the problem seriously.

Evening News, 23 September 1935
Noise Stops Opera

Covent Garden Incident

Stage Din

Machinery Out Of Control

Wireless listeners were startled last night to hear during the third act of the Delius opera "Koanga," which opened the autumn season at Covent Garden, a voice which rapped out sharply, "stop talking."

The voice was that of Sir Thomas Beecham.

Sir Thomas was taking the London Philharmonic Orchestra through a delicate pianissimo passage which formed part of the entr'acte when the music stopped short.

There was some commotion in the orchestra pit, and all over the house people stood up and craned their heads to see what was happening.

Sir Thomas was seen to put down his baton, walk quickly from the conductor's desk, and disappear through the pass-door under the stage. After a few moments, he resumed his seat and the interrupted orchestral interlude was resumed.

Afterwards Sir Thomas told a reporter:

"Apparently there was some breakdown in the mechanism on the stage. I was conducting a very soft piece of music when there was such a row from the stage that I had to stop.

"I went on the stage to see what it was all about. I told them to stop—I won't say exactly what I said—and the noise ceased. I am not saying it was anyone's fault."

(above) Sir Thomas Beecham, pencil portrait by Hilda Wiener; (left) Morning Post, 24 September 1935.
THE STORY OF BRAS-COUPÉ

The announcement of a production of Delius’s “Koanga” at Covent Garden last night has no doubt reminded some of the story of Bras-Coupé, as told in G. W. Cable’s “The Grandissimes,” and may have sent others aresh to that once-celebrated novel of old Louisiana. The book, which was published in 1880, tells of the haughty Creoles and depressed negroes of New Orleans at the time of the Louisiana purchase (1803).

The tragedy of Bras-Coupé—the noble savage who was in Africa a chief, in Louisiana a runaway slave—is an interlude in Cable’s romance. It is related by the lively Raoul Innerarity at a party, at the Grandissimes’, to amuse the young ladies of that proud slave-owning clan.

“Bras-Coupé”—French for Mioko-Koango, or Arm Cut Off—was the name given the captive chief, since his tribe in losing him had lost its right arm. A giant in strength, with more than a lion’s courage, he refuses to work on the plantation, but he falls in love with a quadroon girl and she is given him in marriage by his owner, who hopes thereby to tame him. At the wedding feast he gets drunk, strikes his master and escapes to the swamps.

Venturing into the city to take part in a negro orgy, he is caught by the police and suffers the penalties prescribed by the French code for runaway slaves—his ears are cut off, he is harnstrung, and is flogged to death. But before expiring he has one satisfaction—his maledictions on his master have had their effect, and the creole grandee has died before the slave. The savage’s end is noble, for his last gesture is to lift the voodoo curse from the new-born child of his oppressors.

Delius’s opera was composed in 1895-7, and was first produced at Elberfeld in 1904, with Clarence Whitehill in the part of Bras-Coupé. The work, never before published, has just been issued by Winthrop Rogers (Boosey and Hawkes) in view of the Covent Garden production.
Delius's early opera Koanga, given for the first time in England, opened the short autumn season at Covent Garden last night, and was warmly received by an audience whose appetite for it had been whetted by the short orchestral excerpts which Sir Thomas Beecham has made familiar. No doubt also the audience was prepared to find that, as in the more mature and better known opera A Village Romeo and Juliet, the composer's attitude towards his subject is not that of direct narration. Delius was not anxious to tell a tale in music but to ponder those elements in the tale which had appealed to his imagination. In Koanga he emphasized this, or his librettist did so for him, by throwing the whole action into oblique narration. It is the tale told by the old negro, Uncle Joe, to the eight young ladies, planters' daughters who cluster round him in the prologue and beg him for it. The epilogue seems to hint that they have all fallen asleep over it, perhaps dreamed it; at any rate, it is not the violence of blood sacrifices which has held them spellbound, but the pitifulness of love and death and parting of which they sing as the last tableau fades out.

The composer views it all as if in a dream, and consequently the obvious theatrical situations are given little prominence, and the most entrancing musical moments occur in entractes when the curtain is down, or when the stage is empty or so dark that it is impossible to see what is happening. At the outset the situation, life on a southern plantation in the eighteenth century, must be described, and Delius adopts the conventions of romantic opera, airs choruses and vocal ensembles, to help him to do it, but though his technical mastery of such things was considerable, and snatches of slave melody suggest the local colour, the whole moves with some stiffness, and the actors seem in some uncertainty to know what exactly they are intended to represent. The captive chieftain Koanga is thrown violently into their midst. His love for Palmyra, the half-caste, is the chief motive of the drama, but his discovery of his love goes for little in the midst of an elaborate ensemble number. Mr. Brownlie made much of his song of revolt against his slavery and Mme. Slobodskaya sang finely throughout, but in the final scene had a hard task to make her death song rise to the climax that the composer seems to intend.

When ever the composer could escape from the facts to the implications behind the facts his musical genius asserted itself most strongly. So perhaps the two most impressive scenes are those in which the love goes for little in the midst of an elaborate ensemble number. Mr. Brownlie made much of his song of revolt against his slavery and Mme. Slobodskaya sang finely throughout, but in the final scene had a hard task to make her death song rise to the climax that the composer seems to intend.

A highly creditable performance, marred only by one hitch of some sort in the changing of a scene which caused Sir Thomas Beecham to leave the conductor's desk to go and see what was happening, made an auspicious opening to the season. Delius is still one of the composers of the last generation whose mind remains incompletely explored, and an early work such as this composed before his musical idiom had fully declared itself adds something essential to our knowledge of his outlook quite apart from the many moments of great beauty which the score contains.

The Times, 24 September 1935
Delius’s “Koanga”

To-night a fair but not crowded audience attended Covent Garden for the beginning of the season of the London and Provincial Opera Society, Ltd. (a good English name). The company will visit Manchester towards the end of next month.

With the best will in the world, it is hard to write enthusiastically of “Koanga,” which was produced as a send-off to this latest adventure in British opera. Frankly, the company’s prospects in the country will be improved if the work is withdrawn from the scheme; it is simply not an opera. No doubt Sir Thomas Beecham could arrange a pretty orchestral suite from the score. Delius at his best even was a reflective, not a dramatic, writer. The happiest moments in “Koanga” are the prologue and the epilogue, in which Delius is dreaming or brooding over his theme—recollecting the emotion of it in tranquillity, not trying dynamically to express it. His genius ran essentially to the reflective miniature; he cannot cover a large operatic canvas. He does not understand the technique of the theatre—at least, he did not understand it when he wrote “Koanga.” What would Verdi have thought of the dilettante who makes his hero and heroine sing an important duet with three other characters standing on the stage utterly useless and superfluous? What would any experienced composer of opera think of the novice who writes an entr’acte—and then after a pause, with the theatre in darkness, embarks on a longish orchestral introduction to an act?

“Koanga” is not dramatic; the music has little relation to the action on the stage; the vocal writing is merely conventional, and the score is poor Delius as a whole, even if we make allowances and listen to it not as an opera composition but simply as music. The Delius formula is exploited without the inspiration of the true Delius.

It is not possible for a musician to sit down at will and produce an opera. The urge and the ambition are not enough—that is the mistake of the amateur. The great opera composers lived in the theatre, worked hard in it, and arrived at mastery over a difficult convention only after long experience. “Koanga” is as static as the old-fashioned cantata; the music meanders—and of opera we must always say, with the old lady in Dickens, “Let us have no meandering.” When Koanga dies, Wagner is called upon, but apart from this external device the music remains in colour, texture, and general style the same pale, wandering thing it has been all the evening. The heroine stabs herself, but the music fails to sound a note of tragedy.

It is, as I say, poor Delius, save for the lovely closing scene: the action is over and done with now, Delius glances back on the pathos of it all, and at last we hear the authentic note, incomparably sad and haunting. Delius uses echoes of negro melodies sensitively in the prologue and the epilogue; during the opera itself his resources are limited—a sweeping figure in the strings, echoes in the woodwind, a wash of harmony, and then the expected cadence, usually from the horn. There is little or no body in the score. The orchestra is always repeating itself. There is no growing and plastic texture. The opera is signed by an amateur of talent in every bar. All this is written regretfully by a lover of Delius, regretfully indeed.

The performance was only adequate, in spite of fine orchestral playing under Sir Thomas Beecham, who worked hard to galvanise a wooden company of vocalists, who assumed positions suggestive of eternally suspended activity. In a land where opera is a rare and out-of-the-way occurrence a natural ease of movement and gesture is not to be expected. Still, there is no reason why human beings should become reduced to permanent immobility the moment they find themselves on the opera stage, and, to say the truth, last night’s company could not always make their voices sound impressive or their words articulate, though the music was seldom heavily scored. In their respective and ungrateful parts, John Brownlee and Oda Slobodskaya were sincere and aspiring and competent. The production had its agreeable aspects, and there was some pleasant choral singing and dancing.

The score suggested occasionally a pastiche, it a hundred or so bars of it were lost to-morrow they could be replaced by any other hundred bars from the collected works of Delius. As British opera “Koanga” shows a marked decline in craftsmanship from “The Bohemian Girl.”

N. C.
SET INVENTORY FOR KOANGA

KOANGA PROLOGUE

VERANDAH OF A SOUTHERN PLANTATION HOUSE

1 Cut cloth 60 feet x 36 feet
1 Cut cloth 60 feet x 36 feet

1 Built verandah house on boat truck set centre of stage comprises
   2 skeleton frames form balastrade top & bottom
   1 Roof flat to same
   1 Long balastrade piece
   2 flat frame palasters
   1 Hinged flat to join house section upstage P.S.
   1 Hinged flat to join house section upstage O.P.
   2 set rows, One O.P. one P.S.

ACT 1 SCENE 1 COURTYARD & GARDEN OF DON MARTINEZ HOUSE

1 Built house on Boat truck O.P. comprises
1 Hinged back flat O.P.
2 Small flats with roof hinged centre O.P.
1 Small front flat with door opening O.P.
1 Frame for front to carry verandah roof O.P.
1 Pair of 2 tread steps O.P.
1 Platform to set between back & on stage O.P.
1 Return wing to house flat O.P.
1 Wall flat up and down stage O.P.
1 Wall flat on and off stage with gate O.P.
1 Long back row across stage front of cyclorama
1 Small corn row set centre of stage to O.P.
1 Fence row with animal head on top P.S.
1 Back row set to tree trunk border P.S.
1 Built hut comprises 3 small flats and roof P.S.
1 do. 3 small flats and roof P.S.
2 Foliage wings down stage P.S.
1 Tree border with netted top set P.S. join row.

[from a typescript in the Covent Garden Archives]

[facing] Manchester Guardian review, 24 September 1935
Koanga, Act I Scene I: (l. to r.) Simon Perez, Clothilde, Don José Martinez, Palmyra and Koanga [photo A Console, Royal Opera House Archives]

Koanga, Act II Scene I: The Wedding Scene. Koanga (far left) and Palmyra (far right) with dancers [photo A Console, Royal Opera House Archives]
DELIUS'S NEGRO OPERA

"KOANGA" AT COVENT GARDEN

FAR AWAY AND LONG AGO

By RICHARD CAPELL

The first London performance was given at Covent Garden last night of "Koanga," the third of Frederick Delius's six operas. This event, interesting in itself, was doubly so as inaugurating a new operatic enterprise under Sir Thomas Beecham's leadership, which, with luck, may develop into something more solidly serviceable to the national musical cause, if less showy and expensive, than the bazaar-like seasons of opera for which Covent Garden is famous. "Koanga" has waited for 40 years for this production, but, although it represents an immature Delius, it is still worth hearing. Even here, while failing in much that he set out to do, the composer gave hints of his genius for atmosphere and evocation.

If it has to be admitted that the revival at this time of day is more than anything an act of piety, Fate's unfairness that denied it a hearing when it was new was altogether too cruel. "Koanga" has not many superiors among the operas of the 1890's.

A POIGNANT STORY

The scene—Louisiana, with its ruthless Creole planters and brutalised negroes, in the old days of the French and Spanish domination—is original; the story of the enslaved chieftain Koanga is poignant. But Delius in his handling of it has altogether made up his mind between personal poetry and an opera of effects. A lesser man might have made of it a more effective opera, and the mature Delius would have disregarded everything that did not touch his inner self, and have made of the poignant story that pure poem of "Far away and long ago" of which the work as it stands gives hints.

It was like Delius to set to music a text written not in any real language, but in wooden English of an old-fashioned opera translation. He nearly always set words to music as though he had no language of his own. It is characteristic that the personages hardly ever utter a telling phrase.

But an exception is Koanga's expressive "Far, far away, Palmyra, my people mourn for me," in the scene of his betrothal in the second act. The very words, "Far, far away," seem suddenly to have given Delius a fellow-feeling with his hero.

The compensation for the lack of dramatic psychology and characterisation in the opera is Delius's haunting sense of the poetry of things "far away." It is expressed in interludes suggesting a nostalgia like that of the "Appalachia" variations, in plaintive or half-merry choruses for hidden singers, and in an epilogue that ends the opera with touching effect as the young girls, who are supposed to have been the audience for the story which we have seen enacted, turn from the sorrow of the night to see the young dawn in the sky.

THE STAGE PICTURES

Prelude and epilogue, indeed, tell us that Koanga's tragedy is only an old, dim story, and that is no doubt what we should have felt all along if Delius had composed "Koanga" 15 years later. It is an aspect that a different production might have emphasised. But the hard contours of Nicolas de Mole's nineteen-twentieth stage pictures, with their emphasis on the quaintness of cacti, do nothing of the sort.

On the other hand, the orchestral playing, under Sir Thomas Beecham, made everything possible of what was legendary and tender in the music. The choruses, too, were most effective.

The part of Koanga, written for high baritone, was excellently sung by John Brownlee, who was given an ovation at the end of the second act. But the part is not grateful. For one thing, a blackened face is incapable of expression on a stage the size of Covent Garden.

Another thing is that a white man, no matter how be-blackened, cannot suggest a negro's singing. Here is a crucial difficulty about "Koanga." The part wants a Paul Robeson on the stage, but the music demands the energy of a white man's singing. Oda Slobodskaya, sang with technical elegance and charm as the quadroon girl Palmyra, and the smaller parts were in good hands—Constance Willis, Leyland White, Frank Selle, Reginald Thurgood. All musical London seemed to be in the theatre.

Daily Telegraph, 24 September 1935
DELIUS OPERA

"Koanga" Produced at Covent Garden

From a Music Critic

LONDON, Monday

The brief season of opera which opened at Covent Garden to-night is to be remembered as the first occasion on which the Imperial League of Opera has made its bow before an actual audience in the theatre; and also for the first performance in English of Delius's third opera, "Koanga." Thirty-one years ago this work was given at Elberfeld, and with some success; but there was then no prospect of a production here. Nor would the prospects have been any brighter now but for Sir Thomas Beecham's enthusiasm.

The experience has been well worth while. Without showing the certainty and maturity that can be felt in the "Village Romeo and Juliet," this opera holds much lovely music as well as good, honest stagecraft of the conventional kind. More than in the "Village Romeo" the music waits upon the drama (adapted by C. F. Keary from Cable's novel "The Grandissimes"), and, therefore, not unexpectedly, is less strongly individual than in the later work. The realism of the tale of the beautiful half-caste, Palmyra, and the negro warrior, Koanga, is emphasised by the device of prologue and epilogue (in which an old negro slave is telling the story to some young girls), and Delius could not but follow the direct method of the narrative. He could not here find escape in drama of a purely musical nature as in the "Village Romeo," or in mystical reverie as in that fine choral work, "Sea Drift." In the light of his later development we do not feel that the composer is (as Mozart expressed it) withdrawn and, as it were, completely himself.

This is not to say there is nothing in "Koanga," which is characteristic of Delius. There is more than a little: the unmistakable nostalgia, for example of the slaves' unison song, Koanga's curse at the end of Act 2, and the prelude to the second scene of the last act.

The particular problem in performing this work lies in balancing the voice parts with the orchestra. To-night, Sir Thomas Beecham gave his singers more than enough support, with the result that the texture was sometimes clouded, especially in the first act. In this respect the last act and the epilogue were by far the most satisfactory, and perhaps it was partly due to this improvement in performance that the forest scene (in which Koanga's followers provide a blood sacrifice to voodoo) impressed me as being the peak of the whole work.

Certainly in this scene Mr. John Brownlee, in the title-role, gave us the best of himself and his fine voice. Mine. Slobodskaya, as Palmyra, was not completely successful in carrying her words, although her singing was both sensitive and impressive. The best example in diction came from Miss Constance Willis, in the minor part of Clothilda, and Mr. Leyland White, as Don Jose Martinez, was not far behind. For the rest, there was much to be desired in this matter of clear enunciation: the choral singing, for example, good as it was, just lacked that finishing touch.

But, when all is said, "Koanga," with its dramatic story, its highly romantic music, and its beautiful pictures of 18th century Louisiana, has provided for opera-lovers an experience more than a little removed from the ordinary.

B. M.

Basil Maine in the Yorkshire Post,
24 September 1935; sketch, see p.51
DELIUS'S third opera, "Koanga," was given a first performance in this country to-night at Covent Garden. The work was the product of the composer's Florida impressions, and it was composed during 1896 and 1897. It had a single performance under the conductorship of Fritz Cassirer at the Stadtheater at Elberfeld in 1904. Later, by some unaccountable reason, the manuscript score of the opera was lost, but in 1929 the late Phillip Heseltine discovered the orchestral parts, and after much trouble Mr. Patrick Hadley found the score in the basement of a publisher of music, and he took it to the composer, who was living at Grez at the time. Delius revised the work, and Sir Thomas Beecham, with the assistance of Mr. Edward Agate, revised C. F. Keary's libretto that was based on an interlude in G. W. F. Crabb's novel, "The Grandissimes." Its performance to-night under Sir Thomas Beecham's direction made a most interesting opening of this Autumn Opera Festival at Covent Garden. The music is characteristic Delius. Here and there one is reminded of "Appalachia," "Sea Drift," and "A Mass of Life," but it is lovely music, the beauty of which makes you catch your breath with astonishment. It is reflective and symphonic in its character rather than dramatic.

The story, however, is a tragic one. Old Uncle Joe on a verandah of a Southern plantation is prevailed upon by the girl to tell them a story, and the old negro tells them the story of the Voodoo, Prince Koanga. The scene changes, and Koanga is seen led in chains into the courtyard of Don Martinez's house. The negro chief refuses to submit to the indignity of slave labour, but Don Martinez, the overseer, and with the assistance of Simon Perez, the overseer, the girl is carried off. Koanga tells Martinez, and escapes to the swamps, and with his followers makes sacrifice to Voodoo, and in a tableau Palmyra is seen dying of plague. Koanga returns to the plantation, where he sees the overseer pressing his attentions on Palmyra. With his spear he slays the overseer, but is himself captured and flogged to death. In the end Palmyra stabs herself with her lover's dagger.

Mr. John Brownlee sang and acted the part of Koanga very well, and Madam Oba Slobodskaya was also good as Palmyra, but the heroes of the performance were Sir Thomas Beecham and the orchestra. He was magnificent, and the orchestral playing was wonderful.
Delius's Dim Legend of "Koanga"

By STEPHEN WILLIAMS

The essential charm of Delius's music is that it speaks of nothing but itself; of its own absorption in a distant beauty, of its own fresh and preoccupied delight in its own almost tangible shapeliness.

One steepes oneself in this music with the sensuous concentration with which one strokes fur or crumples a piece of crisp silk in the fingers. It is not profound, and it leaves behind no regret but the tender regret of a withdrawn loneliness.

Above all, it is not operatic music. Impossible to bring home these unmistakably Delian harmonies to the business and bosoms of men; impossible to associate them with the progressive energy of a stage scene, to turn the music of rapt contemplation into the music of direct action.

So it happened that the most exquisite moments of "Koanga," which opened the London and Provincial Opera Society's season at Covent Garden last night, occurred in the entr'actes, when the music floated out into a darkened theatre and took shape "in some close corner of the brain," without the distraction of the stage. "Koanga" is a poor opera, mainly because Delius, whose music was the symbol of inward contemplation, had no sense of the theatre.

When I say, therefore, that last night's was a tame and tepid performance, most of my complaints are directed against the composer. Not all, however. Even Delius could have been given sharper outlines by a production of a more strongly-defined character and singers more compelling in presence and penetrating in voice.

The singing lacked eloquence and distinction. The programme informs me that the opera was sung in English, but I have very slender evidence of this, as I heard on an average only one word in a hundred.

Mr. John Brownlee, as Koanga, the enslaved negro prince, occasionally "got across" and Miss Oda Slobodskaya rose to a high level of passion at the final catastrophe. But these were only thrilling exceptions.

"Koanga" is a dim, unhappy legend of thwarted lovers told by "Uncle Joe," an old negro on a Southern plantation. The score is full of a grave and measured beauty, but nowhere does it convincingly depict the passions, brutalities, jealousies and mystic forest-lore of the story.

Evening Standard, 24 September 1935

DELIUS OPERA

A New Company at Covent Garden

By Our Music Critic

The beginning of the autumn opera season at Covent Garden last night introduced a new company, known as the London and Provincial Opera Society, and a new opera by Delius, entitled "Koanga."

It would be unfair to judge the company on the strength of this performance, for the opera was one that would put the finest collection of operatic talent under a cloud.

The opera fairly glows as Delius, but the more it does so the more it hangs like an opera.

John Brownlee was true to the part in dominating the rest of the company by his fine singing and acting. But even he could not express the character of the African slave.

The real hero of the evening was Sir Thomas Beecham, who gave a superb interpretation of the orchestral score, and who gave us the opera as an act of homage and justice to his dead friend Frederick Delius.

W. MoN.
WHAT THEY THOUGHT
OF "KOANGA"

By J. A. FORSYTH

SIR THOMAS BEECHAM has made
Frederick Delius's name, but it is
doubtful if he did him any real
service by producing at long last his
opera, "Koanga" at Covent Garden
last night.

It was once performed in Germany
years ago.
The scene is a plantation in
Southern America, there is a prologue,
in which an old negro begins to tell
the story, and during the three acts
the love of Koanga, a prince, but a
slave for Palmyra, a beautiful young
half-caste is unfolded.

* * *

The prologue ends with a hymn for
the dead lovers.
Admirer as I am of Delius and his
champion, Beecham this opera is a
disappointing affair.
There is the familiar ring, the old
Delius beauty of tone in some of the
music, but the orchestration is poor.

* * *

The greater part of the words could
not be heard owing to the overpower-
ing orchestra.
Worst of all, it suffers from
monotony—monotony from start to
finish, and monotony will kill any-
thing and anybody.
John Brownlee was the saving
grace of the evening.
He realised the part of the hero,
vocally and dramatically.
Oda Slobodskaya has an effectively
telling voice, but did not look the
young half-caste.
The scenery was new, but the stage
draft lacked a master hand.

The Star, 24 September 1935

By ERIC DUNSTAN

THE broadcasting of opera brings
out its worst points, and will
never be a really satisfactory affair,
but possibly it is better to hear opera
by radio than not at all.

I listened to the first performance
in England of the 40 years' old opera
by Delius.

I listened to most of it, but soon
after 10.30 I had had enough and
switched off.

* * *

There were moments of great
beauty, mainly in the purely orches-
tral parts, but the principal failing of
broadcast opera comes when the
singers are obviously engaged in
dramatic as well as vocal efforts, and
one finds it impossible to make out
what is happening.
The intervals were, for radio pur-
poses, far too long, and the whole
thing for me was too much of an effort
to make it comfortable entertainment.

I don't feel that what I heard really
did "Koanga" justice.

* * *

Of the voices heard, Mme. Slobods-
kaia's came over best, but the most
impressive moment was the opening
of the third act, with an anonymous
and beautiful voice singing a voodoo
incantation.

Although Delius made some conces-
sions to local colour in his suggestions
of negro melodies, I did not know
the setting to be Louisiana, the music
would never have suggested it.

Summed up—from a radio hearing
—"Koanga," was only a qualified
success, which is the best broadcast
opera can ever be.

The Star, 24 September 1935

[FROM P.50] DIFFICULTIES

Considering the inevitable difficulties
and nervousness of an opening night the
performance was quite good. There were
one or two things not altogether right on
the stage, but the soloists sang very well,
especially John Brownlee as Koanga; his
music is not exactly grateful to sing, but
he made it all tell and his acting was con-
vinving.

Leyland White, too, did well as
Marlène; so did Constance Willis as
Clothilde. It is a pity that Oda Slobodskaya,
as Palmyra, had not a little more charm,
for she sang with exceptional competence.

Needless to say Sir Thomas and the
L.P.O. made the most of the entr'actes,
indeed of all the music. If he and they
cannot play Delius, who can? F. T.
"KOANGA" PRODUCED AFTER 40 YEARS

By EDWIN EVANS

Delius's "Koanga," was composed nearly 40 years ago.

The chances of an English opera in its own country were then even more precarious than to-day, but it was produced in 1904 at Elberfeld in Germany.

Early in the war period the score was lost for some years. Eventually it was found in a publisher's basement and returned to the composer, who revised it.

Last night, at long last, Delius's countrymen had the opportunity of hearing it.

The story is a free adaptation from a novel by G. W. Cable, "The Grandissimes," dealing with Creole life in old Louisiana.

"Koanga" is a Negro chieftain, sold as a slave, who rebels against his fate, but becomes temporarily reconciled to it through the love of Palmyra, a half-caste whose mother was of his own tribe.

When she is taken from him and ill-treated he kills his oppressor and is himself slain, whereupon Palmyra stabs herself.

MANY SPELLS

Some of the music is influenced by the impressions Delius retained of negro singing from the two years he spent at the Solano Grove in Florida.

There are also many spells of that luscious stream of sound which is Delius's hallmark.

There is no gainsaying its beauty, but music-drama requires sharper definition, in the absence of which it tends to monotony.

Moreover, at this stage Delius's stagecraft lagged behind his musicianship. In short, "Koanga" will be welcomed by those already converted, but it is not likely to make new converts, nor does it add to Delius's stature. It arrives, in fact, too late.

The cast was dominated, as it should be, by Mr. John Brownlee, in the name-part of which he gave a powerful rendering.

Mme. Odo Slobodskaya was not very happily cast as Palmyra. At times her voice rang out, but generally, one felt that she was making the best of an uncongenial task.

None of the other characters is given much opportunity, but Miss Constance Willis as the planter's wife and Mr. Frank Sale as the overseer made the most of such as came their way.

The chorus, which is given prominence, sang mostly well. The effective scenery and costumes were designed by N. de Molas.

DELIUS'S "KOANGA"

INTERESTING SCORE AND EXCELLENT SINGING

The two weeks' season of Opera at Covent Garden previous to a tour in certain provincial towns opened last night with a performance of Delius's "Koanga," under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham.

How strange is the lure of Opera! Since the symphony and chamber music became the predominant aesthetic fashion theorists have never ceased to point out the defects of the form. Its manifold shortcomings. Yet it persists, thanks to the unrivalled potency of the alliance between the human voice, the orchestra, and the stage latent in the convention.

And in all probability it always will. Who, for instance, would have expected a composer like Delius to be drawn to opera? All his outstanding characteristics are precisely those that would seem to be the furthest removed from the theatre. He has little sense of the dramatic, of characterization, of contrast; he does not even write particularly well for the human voice. Yet, like almost every other composer worth his salt, he must, it seems, attempt the form.

STORY WITHIN A STORY

"Koanga" like "The Tales of Hoffmann" is a story within a story, but unlike Offenbach's masterpiece, the episodes of the story are not sharply differentiated from the story-teller. For instance the prologue and the epilogue—the latter, perhaps, the loveliest music of all—rely on choruses; and so do most of the scenes in the rest of the opera. Indeed, whenever Delius is in doubt, he seems to write for chorus "off."

Generally speaking the most beautiful music (which is very beautiful) is to be found in the entr'actes, but much of Act II. is effective. Act I. is rather dull and the last scene of Act III., rather like bits of "Tristan" and "Gotterdammerung" transferred topically to Abyssinia, is highly reminiscent.

Still even at that early age, the personality of Delius was remarkably individual as a rule; to the attentive ear the score is full of interesting things. Unfortunately, opera is not a form in which the attentive ear is much to the fore.

(above) Francis Toye in Morning Post, 24 September, concluded on p.49; (left) Daily Mail, 24 September 1935
Music
“Koanga.” At Covent Garden

Ever since the beginning there has been a conflict for supremacy between the three elements in opera—music, drama and spectacle. Now one, now the other has taken the front of the stage and thrust its partners into the background. Wagner, it is true, tried to strike a balance. Yet his greatest work, Tristan und Isolde, is a programme-symphony with little external dramatic action and less spectacle. Delius was one of Wagner’s heirs and, when he turned to opera, his model, whether consciously adopted or not, was Tristan. He seems to have been not at all interested in the actions of the characters he presents, but only in their psychological reactions to one another, and his range of interest in their psychology was, in comparison with Wagner’s, narrow.

In The Village Romeo and Juliet he found his ideal subject, and, ignoring all that there is of gusto and merriment in human life except in so far as it might serve to heighten the passive melancholy of the principal actors, he created out of a commonplace tale of a suicide pact a moving, if somewhat morbid, tragedy. It was a tragedy too intimate for a vast theatre like Covent Garden and too subtle for the average operatic singer, accustomed to broad strokes. But no one who saw it on the little stage at The Royal College of Music last year could fail to be profoundly affected by it.

Not all the boredom one felt during the performance of Koanga at Covent Garden on Monday was due to a similar disparity between the work and the theatre. We knew, too, what kind of thing to expect. Framed in a post-dated Prologue

Sir Thomas Beecham conducting ‘Koanga’

Vogue, 30 October 1935
and Epilogue, the action was to be seen dimly through the veil of Time, a pathetic tale of the past told by old Uncle Joe to a bevy of sentimental young ladies. It would be poor criticism to complain that Delius has not seized upon the melodramatic potentialities of his theme and made of it the kind of passionate Grand Opera that Verdi might have created with the same material. But it is neither irrelevant nor unfair to point out that in the theatre we may reasonably expect our interest to be engaged somehow, and that it will not be excited by the spectacle of an empty stage and the sound of distant voices, whose words we cannot catch, nor by long stretches of monotonously introspective music, however luscious and lovely, interrupted perhaps by the momentary revelation of a dim tableau vivant.

Production might have helped in places. If we had been able to see what was happening in the Voodoo ceremony more clearly, the eye might have conveyed to the mind something of the horror that the music lacked. Yet it seemed that the whole essence of this scene had been given to us with far more force at the end of the preceding act, when Koanga rushes through the forest crying for vengeance upon the ravishers of his bride. Here for a moment music, spectacle and drama combined to make the pulse beat faster.

Nor is it unreasonable to ask of an operatic composer that he shall, in his own way, differentiate the characters he presents to us. It was impossible to detect any essential difference in the music allotted to the various persons, and the only attempt at definite characterisation I detected was a sardonic chuckle from the orchestra as the villain advanced to make one of his many assaults upon the heroine. Delius seems to have been interested only in Koanga’s mental stress, the conflict in his conscience between love and fidelity to his gods and to his pride of race. That being so, he should not have wearied us with so much desultory discourse upon other things, during which he sometimes even sinks below the level of competent musicianship. For I take it that the performance under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham was faithful to the composers’ intentions and that what sounded like some poor writing in the first Act was not the fault of the singers and players, who could not always make coherent musical sense of the notes set down for them.

There is, it need hardly be said, a great deal of beautiful music in Koanga. The best is contained in the Epilogue, which is familiar from concert and gramophone performances. The negroes’ choruses are delightful in their simplicity and highly original in texture for music written 40 years ago. There is nearly always something to enchant the senses, if the mind can keep alert to perceive the enchantment under the hypnotic spell of Delius’s unvarying mellifluousness.

Dyneley Hussey.

Spectator, 27 September 1935
DELlUS AND THE OPERA
A QUEST FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE?

By ERNEST NEWMAN

At Covent Garden last Monday, during the intervals and at the end of the performance, everyone was saying that "Koanga" was undramatic and that Delius had little talent for opera. The general truth of these propositions cannot be disputed. Everything in Delius's musical make-up that made him what he was, with all his qualities and all his defects, ran counter to the ordinary conception of opera. In spite of the fact that there is in "Sea Drift," in the "Mass of Life," and in certain other works he has given us some of the most moving inter penetrations of words and music that the history of the art can show, it remains true that, speaking generally, he had virtually no feeling for words. Again and again, in work after work, he sets the teeth of the sensitive listener on edge with his awkward handling of words. It will be said, of course, in some quarters, that where music is concerned the words do not greatly matter. The answer to that easy-going proposition is that there is no law to compel a composer to take words as the starting-point and the inspiration of his music, but that if he chooses to do so he will naturally be expected to observe certain rules of the game. If he persistently shapes his phrases in such a way that the accents and the rhythms and the rise and fall of his music run counter to the very life of the words, he must not complain if sometimes he brings a grimace to the face of his hearers.

Delius's well-known mannerisms as a musician are particularly unpropitious for the setting of words. A glance at random at almost any page of "Koanga," will show the backbone of the verbal phrases, being broken or weakened by the persistent bias of the composer's mind towards certain fixed formulas of musical accent, rhythm, harmony, and contour. No other composer has ever "declaimed" so badly as Delius: rarely can a sentence that has been put to music by him be sung as one would speak it. The music imposes its own accent, rhythm, and articulation upon it; and as these, as everyone recognises, are somewhat standardised in Delius, the result is that not only are the words themselves mishandled, but there emerges next to nothing of the variety of impression that character in action ought to give us on the stage. In "Koanga," for instance, not only do all the characters talk very much alike, but the same character expresses himself in much the same way in all circumstances. It is useless to reply that all Wagnerian characters speak Wagner's special idiom, all Mozartian or Straussian characters an idiom that is unmistakably Mozart or Strauss. That must be granted: but the fact remains that within the limitations of a style marked out for them by their own personalities these composers do succeed in making one stage character sound different from another. Delius does not succeed in doing so.

THE TEXT OF "KOANGA"

His lack of a sense of the theatre is shown in various other ways. He was so unpractical of the words he was setting that he seems to have accepted anything that a librettist put before him. It never occurred to him that his music would be handicapped from the commencement by the characters talking as they would never talk in life, or in literature worthy of the name, but only in the jargon that was thought to be de rigueur in opera a generation or two ago. We do not know, of course, to what extent the just-published text of "Koanga" has been "revised" by other hands: but in the absence of any definite information on that point we must assume that Delius really thought, in company with his librettist, that negro slaves on an American cotton plantation would say, "The dawn begins to gild the East. Each cabin door opens to greet the strident (sic) call. The world resumes again its old unchanging round," and so on; or again, when they have been awakened from sleep a second time, "Once again the weary sun ascends from pallid ocean bed." Nor would any composer with a sense of the theatre, dealing with a subject from real life in which the only clue to the psychological motivation of the characters is what they say about themselves and each other, set half-a-dozen people singing different things at the same time in different rhythms, with the result that all we hear is a web of rich sound with no definite meaning.

SOUND AND SENSE

The cases of the quintet in the "Meistersinger" and the trio in the "Rosenkavalier" are not on all tours with this general procedure of Delius. The really dramatic composer knows precisely why, for a minute or two, he departs from the plain common-sense rule in these matters: he does so deliberately, in order to bring the action and the psychology to a momentarily head. and the overriding result justifies him, even in the theatre. The trouble with Delius is, in the first place, that these departures from dramatic verisimilitude are the outcome not
of a superior musical-dramatic sense, but of the total lack of that sense, and in the second place that, never having been able to visualize in his study the totality of the thing as it would reveal itself on the stage, he sometimes finds himself in a situation that is not merely non-dramatic but downright comic. The cardinal example of this is the episode in which Palmyra, Cloïlida, Perez, Koanga, Martinez, and a four-part chorus of negroes in the fields—plus, of course, the orchestra—with it in an ensemble in which each of the principal characters is given words of his own that are intended to reveal his own motives and reactions. The result of it all is that we do not catch a single word of what they are saying; but when the soloists suddenly lapse into silence we hear the negroes informing us—as if this had been the essence of the whole matter—that "Now we may put sethie and sickle away, for the dinner-bell is ringing!"

Delius's congenital helplessness in stage matters is shown in various other ways. "Koanga" is too long for a short opera and too short for a long one: consequently, as the audience has to be given the feeling that it is getting the measure of itself in the shape of a full evening's entertainment, the time has to be spun out with extraneous orchestral matter (presumably from other works of his); which has the double effect of thickening out the tenuous stage action still further and of making the audience feel at the end that some of the music it liked best had nothing to do with the drama.

THE QUEST FOR A NEW FORM

To make out a general case against Delius as a dramatist, then, is easy. But when we have said all we can say along these lines we have perhaps only touched the surface of the matter. A more sympathetic and perhaps more discerning view of it all would be that Delius's failure is due to his having been reaching out all his life to a new dramatic form germane to his genius, without ever succeeding in discovering quite what that form would have to be. Ordinary dramatic expression of character or painting of situation was in the main beyond him: in his art, as in his life, he was much too self-centred for that. But in his own way he certainly had an interest in character and situation; and the problem for him was to find a dramatic, or quasi-dramatic, form that would enable him to deal with these in his own peculiar way. By the very build of his brain he was incapacitated from attaining much variety of musical idiom, though he could give an astonishing number of facets to the idiom that was personal to him. He could never get outside himself, never project himself, as the more objective dramatist necessarily has to do; with him, man, that nature, had always to be shown as he appeared to Delius.

He is therefore in his real element in drama only when he can talk in—person about a vital matter instead of making the protagonists speak for themselves. The best thing in the "Village Romeo and Juliet" is that exquisite intermezzo in which Delius shows us his young lovers not in action but as a pretext for his own tender and pitiful nursing upon them. In "Koanga" he begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue in which Uncle Joe and his listeners first talk of the drama-to-come and then reflect upon it. That this is "hard theatre" we all admit: but it is good Delius. He may not be able to show us Koanga's style intelligible on the stage: but when he himself pouts out upon them and he the flood of his sensitive brooding upon them we feel that purification of the soul by pity which was, of course, his real purpose in taking up this drama, but the full realisation of which was possible to him only in his own way, not in the ordinary way of the theatre.

"FENNIMORE AND GERDA"

He found, for once, something like the material and the form that enabled him to express himself most in action, and in action only—in his "Fennimore and Gerda." Here the action of Jacobsen's novel ("Nicola Lyhne") is cast into eleven short scenes, each lasting no more than a few minutes. Economic and other conditions of theatre make the work practically impossible, of course. If, however, it could be given in a production in the half-mystical style suited to it, it would produce an extraordinary effect—at any rate on an audience of philosophers and poets. For here, at last, Delius found a form that allowed him to describe the inner drama of souls in his own way, a way that allowed him to accompany the characters in person, by means of his music (especially of his orchestral interpolations), in each of the decisive episodes of their lives. And finally comes to the conclusion that all his life he was groping towards a new type of musical drama, but that the problems with which it confronted him were beyond the capacity either of his librettists, his own genius, or the conventional theatre to solve.
Opera at Covent Garden

The newly-formed London and Provincial Opera Society, acting in conjunction with the League of Opera and with Sir Thomas Beecham as artistic director, gave a fortnight's season at Covent Garden from September 23. Six operas were given — 'Koanga' (on the opening night), 'Siegfried', 'Der Freischütz', and 'La Bohème' in English and 'Il Barbiere' and 'Un Ballo in Maschera' in Italian. With a few exceptions the casts were English in the one case and Italian in the other. The conductors, besides Sir Thomas Beecham, were Mr. Albert Coates, Mr. Robert Ainsworth, and Mr. Clarence Raybould.

Delius's 'Koanga' is an opera about a Noble Savage who Dies for Love. He is brought as a slave from darkest Africa, where his Voodoo priesthood seems to have given him the gift of tongues, for on arrival at the orange plantation he immediately addresses the white people in their own stilted libretto language. There is the stuff of opera in this story, but after being crippled by the librettist it is stifled by the composer. Delius's music is full of beautiful sound and colour, but it plays upon the composer's own moods and manners rather than upon the situations and incidents of the text. The plea that the opera is a symphonic poem with its clues shown on the stage is less convincing than in the case of 'A Village Romeo and Juliet,' for in 'Koanga' Delius was clearly aiming at an opera of action. His failure was due chiefly to his inability to keep words alive while setting them to music. The performance, under Sir Thomas Beecham, owed more to Mr. John Brownlee, as Koanga, than to the remainder of the company, or to the setters and producers.

Musical Times, November 1935

Sir Thomas Beecham

is Kind.

OPERA AUDIENCES.

Improving, But Sometimes Miss Chances.

English opera audiences are improving.

That was the view expressed to-day by Sir Thomas Beecham, who has more than once publicly rebuked audiences for inattention and noisiness. He was interviewed on the forthcoming provincial tour of the opera company which is now at Covent Garden, giving London its first autumn opera season for several years.

"My past experience of provincial audiences shows me that they are sometimes a little slow to realise that an event of this importance is taking place under their eyes and ears, until the opera company is on the point of departing for its next milestone of travel," Sir Thomas said with a smile.

"Still, I am not seriously apprehensive on this occasion. I feel that with the wider spread of musical knowledge and education, in which the British Broadcasting Corporation has played so vigorous a part, the musical public of our great provincial cities will make the fullest use of their opportunities to fill every corner of their theatres during our whole visit."

Sir Thomas had a good word to say for London audiences.

"The results of this season in London have exceeded the expectations of the
management," he said. "There is no doubt
that it has been the most successful of its
kind for many years past, in every respect.

"I have been gratified by the enthusiasm
and commendation of the public, notably
that considerable portion of it which has
the opportunity of hearing opera everywhere
on the Continent. I am assured by such
persons that the performance of the six
operas we have given were well up to the
standard of any one of the great theatres of
the Continent.

Foreigners Astonished.

"Visiting foreigners have been astonished
at the high quality of the singing and the
beautiful voices of many of the English
artists.

"There is every hope that next year this
autumn venture will be of considerably
longer duration and that eventually it may
be found possible to make it an important
part of the year's musical programme in
London."

"I trust that the provincial cities will
appreciate the fact that in the visit of this
company they will be supporting an enterprise of far wider scope and different
classification from any that has ever come their
way before."

Provincial cities, according to Sir Thomas,
will enjoy operas with very little to differen-
tiate them from the so-called 'grand season'
at Covent Garden in the summer. The

English contingent consisted of the 'fine
flower of our native singing world. Walter
Widdop's Siegfried, he said, could hold its
own with the interpretation of that part
heard at any German festival, and other
English singers, like Heddie Nash and Arthur
Frac, could challenge comparison with their
Italian colleagues.

A "New" Star.

A pleasing touch of romance, said Sir
Thomas, with his humour, had been added
to the season by the unexpected appearance
of a new star of unusual quality and
character, bearing a foreign name, but
declared by the bulk of some knowledgeable
people to be of British origin.

Sir Thomas was referring to Miss Dora
Jarrett's triumph when she starred in "La
Bohème" under the unknown name of "Lisa
Perrit."

The opera company will travel on Sunday
to Birmingham, where their provincial
season begins on Monday.

Yorkshire Evening Post, 4 October
1935., also appearing in the York-
shire Evening News of the same
date.

The Wedding Scene at Covent Garden. (Centre, with silly hats) Palmyra and
Koanga.

[photo A Console, Royal Opera House Archives]
A NOTE ON “KOANGA”

OPERATIC STORY-TELLING

Last week a correspondent suggested that it would be a public service if The Times would publish a concise account of the story of Delius’s Koanga before its production at Covent Garden. The suggestion was not taken for the excellent reason that we did not know it. Nor did we particularly want to know it beforehand. There is a good deal to be said for, taking the story of an opera straight from the stage, and it is an exercise which operatic audiences too rarely get. The first-night audience at a new play expects to do so. The first question it is asked is: Does the play tell its story? Possibly that ought not to be the first question in the musical theatre, but it is at any rate a question the answer to which counts for something in the judgment of a new opera.

Purveyors of opera in this country seem to have made up their minds not only that an opera cannot be expected to tell its own story at a first hearing, but that, however often an opera is given, the public will never learn the story from the simple process of watching and listening. There seem to be two reasons for that. The purveyors always think of themselves as conducting a mission to the heathen, and imagine themselves to be filling their opera house with possible converts to the operatic faith. So Covent Garden prints on its programmes a synopsis of the opera story of the night, and the audiences, who have come, as most audiences do, because they know Wagner or some other favourite by heart, relieve the tedium of the long intervals by reading the synopsis to see how funny it is. There is also in the majority of cases at Covent Garden, though not so much just now, the fact that operas are performed in languages which the majority of the hearers do not understand. A synopsis may help them to pretend to do so.

This season, however, opened with an opera, written to an English text, which was not generally known because it had not been widely circulated beforehand. We will confess that, probably in common with many others who were going to hear Koanga for the first time, we took a glance at Heseltine’s well-informed book on Delius to see what he had to say about it. Finding that he had nothing to say about it, we came to the conclusion that there must be some good reason why we should not be told what it was all about. Heseltine may have refrained from the same reason which withheld us from satisfying our correspondent. He had never seen the opera performed, and his perusal of the score led him to judge that the text and construction are “decidedly operatic.”

What did he mean by that? Surely, what the hearer has found this week, that the story of Koanga is of the kind which distracts the attention both of the composer and the listener from the opera itself. The writer of the text (C. F. Keary) thought of the kind of thing which has gone to the making of a thousand other operas—true love and false love, heroism and villainy leading to violent action, murder, and suicide. Delius, having unfortunately elected to take temptation in Florida and returned to Europe, took all that for granted as a necessary concomitant of an opera, and studied to express it in ways that had become time-honoured by the usage of other European composers. The life of contemplation was his real life and it was that which he wanted to make the real subject-matter of an opera about the Southern plantation of his dreams. Consequently, as has been pointed out, the moments in Koanga which make it still a living work of art are those in which the composer shakes himself free of the facts of the story and takes a deep breath of that air which he had inhaled when he was supposed to be planting oranges. There are a few pages in Heseltine’s book on Delius about his life at the Solano grove which are a better preparation for hearing Koanga than any synopsis of the story can be.

In spite of the hampering effect of Keary’s story, Delius does in fact tell his own story of inner experience fairly conclusively in Koanga, but minds riveted on Keary are liable to miss Delius. The stage production at Covent Garden is not very helpful to Delius. Its devisers seem to have said to themselves: This is not a very satisfactory opera, so let us see how like a satisfactory opera we can make it look. The same thing happened at Covent Garden years ago with A Village Romeo and Juliet, with the result that it was not until after Delius’s death, when Sir Thomas Beecham, in collaboration with Mr. Jack Gordon and in command of the students of the R.C.M., gave the
The operatic composer's relation to his librettist is a perennial problem. Wagner solved it by assuming both offices. Verdi hardly attempted to solve it till Boito did so for him, and Hofmannsthal accepted a similar responsibility towards Strauss. Most composers, and Delius was one of them, wander through life making the best of bad jobs, the badness lying in the fact that the librettist does not know what the composer wants to say. In opera the composer is the person who has got to say things — and the librettist is merely afforded him an occasion for his speech. The latter is not, as in a play, telling his own story. That is why to fasten the attention of the listener on the contents of the book is always dangerous, and may be fatal. The ideal opera and opera-production throw the emphasis in the right place so as to tell the listener what is primary and what secondary in the composer's experience, and the listener's pleasure in the opera lies in making that discovery through the joint work of its interpreters.

The Times, 28 September 1935

Delius Opera Broadcast.

'Koanga' Given At Covent Garden.

Last night's relay from Covent Garden of the first English performance of 'Koanga,' Frederick Delius' early opera of South American plantation life in the sad old days of noble slaves and cruel overseers, gave listeners in Delius' native West Riding a promising foretaste of the experience in store for them in the near future when Sir Thomas Beecham's company sets forth on its provincial tour.

Composed between 1895 and 1897 and originally produced at Elterfeld, in Germany, over 30 years ago, the music of 'Koanga,' so far as one may judge from the wireless presentation, has not much in common with the mature Delius with whom we have become familiar in the concert hall. Undoubtedly it is the music of a master.

The solo and chorus ensembles towards the end of the first act, for example, are built up with a solidity and brilliance which invite — and sustain — technical comparison with Wagner and the later Verdi; and the score as a whole is woven with a richness and continuity of resources that should silence for ever those (if any such remain) who tend to dismiss Delius as a sort of groping amateur.

COMPOSER'S CRAFT.

Like the symphonic poem 'Paris,' which dates from the same period, 'Koanga' offers startling proof that Delius was in complete possession of the composer's craft long before he wrote the works upon which his wider fame depends. What he had yet to achieve in those days was the application of that craft to deeper wells of poetry and philosophy within him.

One striking thing about 'Koanga' is the sparing use of plantation tunes. The 'Appalachia' variations have in them a good deal more 'nigger' blood. The festal music which accompanies the wedding of Koanga and Palmyra so far from being Negro is rather European — almost Parisian — Indeed, it makes one think of Bizet at his best.

During his interlude talk Mr. Eric Fenby, who acted as Delius's amanuensis during his protracted last illness, made the interesting disclosure that certain music for small orchestra in the last act was dictated by the composer from Ideas which he culled from 'Irmelin,' his first opera.

The new opera was given an enthusiastic reception. At the first interval there were four curtain calls. Music-lovers present included Lady Snowdon, Lady Victoria Paget, the Countess of Jersey, and the Duchess of Rutland. Lady Cunard, with a party, occupied the Royal Box.

A HITCH.

During the third act there was a hitch. The music suddenly ceased during the transition from the first
scene glade in the forest to the second on the plantation. The drop-curtain was lowered at the time.

Sir Thomas Beecham said to a reporter later: "What happened apparently was that there was some breakdown in the mechanism on the stage. I was conducting a very soft piece of music when there was such a row from the stage that I had to stop. I put down my baton and went on the stage to see what it was all about. I told them to stop—I won't say exactly what I said—and the noise ceased. Then I went back to my place in the orchestra and resumed the music."

The music which I was about to play when the noise began was not included in the opera by Delius. It was a passage from Delius's works which I had included myself during rehearsals at this point, because I thought it was fitting there during the transition from the one scene to the other.

"What I wanted to achieve was ruined by the noise on the stage. I am not saying it was anyone's fault. Everyone was admirable, including the orchestra and singers," remarked Sir Thomas.

When the music was resumed the audience occupied their seats and the opera went on uninterruptedly to its conclusion. But in the foyer afterwards little groups of people stood for a long time discussing the occurrence.

Yorkshire Observer, 24 September 1935

MUSICAL TOPICS

Broadcast Opera and Koanga

by Professor F H Shera

(Sheffield Telegraph, 22 October 1935, p.5)

To hear an opera for the first time by wireless even with the score open in front of one is clearly not the ideal way; but it is a way which must needs suffice for a good many of us, and I should be the last one to deny its advantages. Apart from the obvious material ones—the avoidance of expense and possible discomfort in connection with transport, seating and ventilation—the following of the score ensures that the words, at any rate, are understood, and a good deal of the music heard. The reader will note the qualification of the last phrase. Whatever the cause, I have heard far better broadcasts from Covent Garden than that at the première [sic] of Koanga on September 23rd. The deficiency is more likely to have been technical than the fault of Delius's scoring, though it must be remembered that Koanga is the work of a relatively young man. And the music being, as far as could be judged, conceived on the piano and transferred to the orchestra, the 'thin' effects may have been simply the result of immaturity. This is one of the points that only direct experience can decide.
PART OF EFFECT MISSED

But assuming that the listener at home gets a performance which is wholly satisfactory on the musical side, to receive his first impression by wireless means that he is all the time missing about 40 per cent of the effect designed by the composer. This is a platitude, but it is too seldom remembered. The composer of an opera writes with a picture of the stage, with its scenery, costumes and gestures, before his mind; and no imaginative picture can replace the real one.

The case is not on all fours with that of the symphonic poem, though at first sight it might seem so. The composer of a symphonic poem is illustrating a series of actions; but he knows that he will have no stage to help him, and two consequences inevitably follow. His music must be more graphic, and it must move more quickly. The first of these requirements may be disputed but only, I think, by those who in any case regard the symphonic poem as a degenerate form of art. The second should be clear enough. The imagination works at enormously high speed, and as it visualises the programme of a symphonic poem, it can follow a far swifter progress than is possible to opera.

FIRM ILLUSTRATION

The cinema provides a useful illustration, for the normal tempo of its action is considerably more rapid than that of the stage; and the normal tempo of opera is considerably slower than the spoken drama. In Miss Grace Moore's film, 'On Wings of Song', it is interesting to note the skilful choice of an operatic excerpt. 'La Bohème' is one of the most concise operas ever written. All in all it plays less than two hours, and the second act is over in 20 minutes. (The superior person may object that this is due to the scrappiness of Puccini’s ideas, or in his poverty of resource in developing them; but that is another story.) The latter part of the first act, from Mimi’s arrival, never drags in a good stage performance. On the screen, by comparison with the normal tempo of film-action, it is only saved from unendurable tedium by the admirable singing of Miss Moore and her excellent colleague.

These discursive remarks will perhaps show why it is desirable to write with reserve about an opera heard for the first time under broadcast conditions. Just as music is written to be heard and not to be read, though the ability to read it undoubtedly sharpens the sense of hearing, so opera is meant to be seen as well as heard, though to hear and read it may be a useful preparation for the direct experience; and the reverse order is undeniably the better.

THE LIBRETTO

One of the principal factors in the whole, however, can be briefly considered without great injustice; the libretto. Here again, it may be argued, the final proof of the pudding is in the eating; but certain points were prominent.

On a general view, the story of Koanga is not essentially gripping. The noble savage, prince and priest of Voodoo has a certain significance, and there is at
any rate no merely theatrical clap-trap about his sinister imprecations. But as a tragic figure he lacks impressiveness. It is not easy to recall a good all-round analogy. He is intended to inspire pity and terror; most of the heroes of tragic opera are intended to inspire one or the other. But Koanga inspires less pity than, say, the Dutchman; and he certainly inspires less terror than the malignant Kaspar in 'Der Freischutz'.

The rest of the characters are the merest type-figures. In visible performance the actors may be able to give them the semblance of life; musically, not one of them seems to have a particle of individuality.

**DISCIPLINE FOR LISTENER**

The charm of 'Koanga's' libretto (and charm it certainly possesses) should lie chiefly in its exotic and tropical setting. And the general atmosphere is, one imagines, particularly well-suited to the lush luxuriance of Delian harmonies. On the other hand, it needs a little self-discipline in the listener if, when he hears the girls talking to 'Uncle Joe' and catches echoes of the idiom of the late Stephen C Foster, not to think of burnt cork and the seaside in August. (Why are uncles - and aunts - so singularly inappropriate to tragic opera?)

It remains to add a few words about the music, though the warning must be repeated that it may not have come through perfectly, and that in any case only the most provisional estimate can be made before it is heard in the theatre...

The vocal writing for the soloists is not often grateful; Palmyra, the heroine, is better treated than the other characters; but I cannot think that even she had cause for excessive gratitude. The accentuation of words is sometimes casual, and there is a lack of inevitability in the melodic curves.

**CHORUS WORK A DELIGHT**

The chorus, however, has an abundance of tuneful and lovely music. Delius being essentially a harmonist seems to be more comfortable with a chorus which he can (and often does) see instrumentally, than with an accompanied solo. Every bar of the chorus work is a delight to the ear, and there are several fine ensembles.

The orchestral interludes, and the orchestral part generally, are authentic Delius; now again, perhaps, they recall Grieg more definitely than the later works; but they are none the worse for that.

So much for first impressions. Many of them will no doubt be contradicted in the theatre, but they may have some usefulness in showing the limitations of broadcast reception and on fomiting the keen listener to hear the 'real thing' for himself.
A recording of Delius bought by many music-lovers on 78s was Constant Lambert's 12" plum-label HMV of *La Calinda* from *Koanga*, coupled with the Intermezzo and Serenade from *Hassan*. (Indeed, it was the first record I ever bought.) And it was not deleted until February 1957 and immediately reappeared on a '45'. Yet Lambert did not conduct much Delius nor did he have much to say about the composer in his book *Music Ho!*, though he concluded that ultimately Delius allowed harmonic considerations excessive weight in his music. However, he certainly appears sympathetic to Delius in his press criticism.

It was Angus Morrison who first drew attention to the parallel between Delius's experience of hearing Negro voices singing during summer nights on his Florida plantation, and Lambert's moment of 'true inspiration' when he first saw the C B Cochran review which included the Plantation Orchestra, which gave London its first sight of the troupe of coloured artists who later achieved fame as the 'Blackbirds'. As Richard Shead points out, Lambert's harmony in his choral writing in his celebrated work *The Rio Grande* is not without its debt to Delius. Indeed, Christopher Palmer has drawn our attention to the parallel between the final passage of *The Rio Grande* and Delius's *Appalachia*, where both composers use a solo voice rising from within the chorus to articulate highly charged emotion.

Many of the composers who were friends and associates of Lambert, many championed by Lambert in his role as conductor, wrote within the shadow of Delian harmony, including Moeran, Warlock, van Dieren and Hadley. Even Lambert himself, when he reaches the climax of his greatest work the choral 'masque' *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, adopts the Delian device of wordless voices at the climax of the first part.

So to read Lambert's contemporary reaction to Delius's operas as they appeared on the London stage at the distance of only a year is to have a particularly well-qualified reporter, yet one who had not experienced Delius before the First World War and hence had no residual critical baggage of an earlier era.

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18. Reissued on CD, Testament SBT1014
By CONSTANT LAMBERT

An Early Delius Opera

"KOANGA," Delius's early opera, performed for the first time in England at Covent Garden last week, though hardly a stage success as a whole, contains many superbly dramatic moments.

They occur when the curtain is down or when the stage is plunged into almost total darkness.

This at first sight reads like a condemnation of Delius as a stage writer. But a moment's thought will show that nothing of the sort is intended.

Wagner is admitted, even by his detractors, to have at least a theatrical sense, and can anyone deny that Siegfried's funeral march (which, according to old opera conventions, is only an "entr'acte") is more dramatic than the actual murder of Siegfried which we see?

OPERAS AND NOVELS

OPERA is often nearer to the technique of the novel, where drama can be achieved indirectly or by retrospect.

To take, for example, the novels of Conrad (who has more than one trait in common with Delius). These works, always considered dramatic, are by many now considered melodramatic, particularly by the type of critic who temperamentally prefers an elaborate description of nothing in particular to a succinct account of something rather important.

Yet if we examine them more closely we find that all the murders, explosions, &c., occur as in a Greek drama, off-stage.

"KOANGA" is a curiously transitional work, hence its unique interest for the student of Delius, and hence the reasons why it ultimately fails as an opera.

In it we see Delius striving to establish both the musical vocabulary and the operatic technique which he so magnificently achieved in "The Village Romeo and Juliet," a work which stands head and shoulders above the rest of the twentieth-century repertoire.

As in most transitional works, the transition takes place before our eyes, and the later scenes of the opera are greatly superior to the earlier. In the first act Delius is hampered by stiff and unwieldy libretto and by a conventional operatic technique of a type he was soon to discard.

He was never much of a hand at dramatic recitative (the only bad scenes in "The Village Romeo" are the quarrel scenes), and when it came to writing a set quartet or quintet he was about as bad as Conrad when he tried to write a play.

Most of the first act then must be written off as a failure.

NEGRO SONGS

With the second act things begin to liven up. The negro choruses, reminiscent of "Appalachia," are charming, and the Creole dances, in an unexpected vein for Delius, are delightful—gay, nostalgic, and as pretty as a cigar-box lid.

But, more important than this, is the growing power shown in the solos for Palmyra and in particular Koanga. In fact, the only really weak spot in this act is the actual abduction of Palmyra, a passage which Verdi would have managed with consummate ease but which Delius fumbles badly.

It is not until the third act, however, that we get an intimation of the really great composer Delius was to become in a few years' time.

The orchestral introduction to the swamp scene may be looked on by some as merely a successful piece of "tone-painting." But it is important to distinguish it from the purely landscape "tone-painting" of the French impressionists.

If there is one trait which links Delius with Conrad it is his treatment of nature as a background to human emotion. Their works are neither portraits nor landscapes, but "landscapes with figures."

The introduction to Act III., though apparently static, is in essence as dramatic as any murder or suicide in Italian opera.
Unfortunately, the dramatic tension of this act was spoiled by a long silent pause and a piece of interpolated music between the swamp scene and the plantation scene.

Not only did this take away from the effectiveness of the sombre six note figure ("and we are weary too") which should lead as relentlessly on to the dénouement, but it anticipated the real climax of the work—the orchestral interlude which precedes the epilogue.

This interlude, recorded in the Delius Society album, is enjoyable enough in the concert hall, but cannot be really judged until it is heard in its true place, the theatre. It shows Delius's genius for emotional peroration at its best and is a worthy forerunner of the similar interlude in "The Village Romeo and Juliet" (The Walk to the Paradise Gardens).

The scenery by Nicholas de Molas introduced to us a talented artist, new (as far as I know) to the stage.

Sunday Referee, 27 September 1935

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This history of Delius's opera Koanga has taken the story up to the Covent Garden performances of September and October 1935. Beecham then took the production into the provinces, touring to Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford and Leeds. Coverage of these and much later performances, including Stanford Robinson's 1958 BBC broadcasts and Sir Charles Groves' 1970 staging at Sadler's Wells Theatre, will appear in later issues of the Journal.

Meanwhile, Leeds Youth Opera is producing Koanga between 6th and 9th July 1994. This company comprises sixty-four young people between the ages of 12 and 25 who work to produce two full-length operas a year. They are accompanied by an orchestra derived mainly from Leeds Youth Orchestra. Recent productions have included Akhnaten by Philip Glass, Sondheim's Sweeney Todd, Verdi's Macbeth, Bernstein's Candide and Bizet's The Pearl Fishers. Enquiries should be addressed to the Honorary Secretary, Martin Shaw, 0532 785236 or 0977 685101.

The Delius Society

Enquiries concerning membership of the Delius Society should be made to the Treasurer, Derek Cox, at Mercers, 6 Mount Pleasant, Blockley, Glos. GL56 9BU (0386 700175). Information on Society events may be obtained from the Programme Secretary, Brian Radford, at 21 Cobthorne Drive, Allestree, Derby DE3 2SY (0332 552019 home, or 0332 42442 ext. 3563 work).
Ella Russell, the first Palmyra