

'A MASS OF LIFE' IN NEW YORK

I am indebted to Miss Anne Hull and to Mr. Frank Tack, both of whom sent newspaper cuttings of the performance which took place at Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, on Tuesday evening, January 31st of this year. The artists were Lenora Lafayette, Soprano, Helen Watts, Contralto, Murrey Dickie, Tenor and Rainund Herinox, Baritone, with the Little Orchestra Society conducted by Thomas Scherman. Mr. Tack also sent me a copy of the Programme, a splendid production compared with our poverty-stricken English examples.

The programme notes were by Mr. Fenby and the German text was printed in full (the performance was sung in German); also included was an article 'Nietzsche, Wagner and Delius' by Robert Jacobson.

In sending this material to me Mr. Tack said:-

"After an hiatus of almost exactly thirty years, the Mass of Life was performed again in the U.S.A. I couldn't help wondering the other night at Philharmonic Hall how many others beside myself had been present at the 1937 performance.

The response was most gratifying - a truly enthusiastic audience, tho somewhat short of capacity. Nevertheless, I overheard a remark from one of the younger members to the effect that it was his first and last exposure to "THAT composition". A twelve-tone enthusiast I guess."

The critic of the 'New York Times', Mr. Harold C. Schonberg, wrote an introductory article entitled 'A Fanatic about Nietzsche' in the edition of January 29th from which I quote some interesting paragraphs:-

"A Mass of Life" is not a religious work, nor was Delius a religious man. He once wrote Eric Fenby about religions and creeds, and said that he had no use for them. "There is only one real happiness in life, and that is the happiness of creating." Later British writers, such as Phillip Heseltine and Wilfrid Mellers, automatically use the term "pantheist" when discussing Delius.

Delius is not very much in favour these days, and there are few critical studies about him that have much depth or authority. If his music ever enjoys a wide revival - and one hopes so; he was one of the most personal composers in history, and that endless flow of his, in which melody and harmony almost are as one - if, as I say, his music is revived, and if scholars begin to work on it, some interesting parallels between him and some German composers will be found.

Delius, with his complete individuality and peculiar notions about form, was much discussed in Germany during the last two decades of the 19th Century, and his music made a decided impact. Before writing this article, I played the old Beecham recording of "A Mass of Life", and at one spot the lady of the house came rushing in "Why", she said. "It sounds like 'Kindertotenlieder' or 'Das Lied von der Erde'" which was still another tribute to her unfailing good sense. The baritone solo starting "Susse Leier" (the recording is in German) does indeed call Mahler to mind. And there are touches throughout Reger's music that suggest he too knew the scores of Delius. Both Reger and Delius, of course, worked in highly spiced chromatic harmony, more chromatic than "Tristan" or even Franck; but there are some fingerprint progressions of Delius, peculiarly his own, that sound very unexpected and strange when heard in a Reger score.

When Delius set "Zarathustra", he was not particularly interested in Nietzsche the philosopher. Nietzsche the poet was what stimulated him. There was a strong streak of pantheism in Nietzsche that must have attracted Delius, and in addition there was the Dionysian element that the German was always writing about. And the opening chorus of "A Mass of Life" is one of the most Dionysian outbursts in music, much more so than the opening of Strauss's "Also sprach Zarathustra" which is electrifying, but which does not wear well.

One wonders what Nietzsche would have thought of "A Mass of Life." He might have liked the title, if nothing else. As Mellers has pointed out, the very title is anti-Christian. The liturgy holds no mass for life. And in the score there is (in addition to certain German elements) a healthy suggestion of the new French style of Debussy. But both German and French influence can be discounted, for this score is mature Delius, and mature Delius always means sensuousness, pantheism (there's that word again), harmonies so rich they all but stick together, forms that are entirely original, and a consecutive flow that carries Wagner's idea of endless melody a step further. ("A sense of flow," Delius said, was the only thing that mattered in music.) In a very curious sort of way, also, the music of Delius is solipsistic. It exists for itself and by itself, closed in its own circle. It had surprisingly little antecedent and no future influence.

One of the amusing things in musical history, apropos the closed-in music of Delius, was his interest in Walt Whitman, as expressed in such large-scale scores as "Sea Drift" and "Appalachia" Whitman, the big, burly, bearded man, the chest-beater, the barbaric yawp of emergent, lusty America; and Delius, the thin, pallid esthete, independently wealthy, crowd-hating, reserved. Opposites attract, they say. As a matter of fact, it may be that basic law (positive attracts negative) which also accounts for Delius's fascination with Nietzsche. And "Also sprach Zarathustra" gave Delius the text for a remarkable score. It should be worth dropping into Philharmonic Hall on Tuesday. There are not many chances to hear "A Mass of Life."

It is a pity that Mr. Schonberg spoiled an otherwise good article with his description of Delius as 'the thin, pallid esthete', a completely incorrect description. As a young man and in his maturity Delius was, of course, quite the contrary - healthy and vigorous and an excellent athlete, capable of exhausting walking tours in the Norwegian mountains, and fond of cricket and tennis. Even in his final illness, this stern, forbidding man could hardly be called a 'pallid esthete.' Nor was he ever 'independently wealthy'. His music earned him a few hundred pounds a year at the most and even with Jelka's help he was never well-to-do.

Mr. Schonberg's review of the 1st February is reproduced in full below. I have reservations about the reference to Nietzsche's 'basic adolescent sentimentality' - sweeping judgments of this type are too glib to be true - but the remainder is very much on the right lines:-

"Whatever one thinks of Nietzsche's "Also sprach Zarathustra" it does contain rapturous paeans to nature and to life. In its orchestral setting by Richard Strauss, it is a superbly colored, thoroughly Germanic exposition of the nature-painting aspects of the poem. In its choral setting by Frederick Delius, it is a rich, sensuous, gorgeous work that strikes far deeper than the Strauss. It has a kind of rapture that matches the rapture of the original.

The choral version turned up last night in Philharmonic Hall, where Thomas Scherman led the Little Orchestra Society in one of the few performances of the big score in many years. To anybody responsive to the Delius idiom - and, of course, anybody who has become familiar with the work through the old Beecham recording - its idiom quality immediately asserted itself. From the opening "Invocation" to the Mahlerian ending, "A Mass of Life" has all the beauty, individuality, colour and charm of Delius at his best.

Delius was one of music's originals, and while it is possible to find certain precedents in "A Mass of Life," it is nevertheless amazing how little it really owes to anybody. Those slithering harmonies, those winding melodies, those delicate touches of orchestration, that intense chromaticism - all these are unique with Delius. The standard term applied to the music of Delius is "pantheistic"; and, indeed, the frank sensuality and nature painting of such movement as "On the Mountains" does suggest pantheism.

The philosophy of the work can be ignored these days. Nietzsche as a thinker is not particularly germane to "A Mass of Life" nor is his basic adolescent sentimentality. It is the music that counts, and the important thing is that Nietzsche's fustian triggered in Delius a score that has beauty and power, just as the embarrassingly sentimental poetry that Mahler used for his "Kindertotenlieder" triggered as equally beautiful work.

Mr. Scherman, for this performance, used a somewhat larger orchestra than usual, though it still sounded rather thin. "A Mass of Life" needs a big, virtuoso orchestra to make its full effect. The four soloists were Helen Watts, a Welsh contralto making her American debut; Lenora Lafayette, soprano, and Rainund Herinx, the British baritone, both making their New York debuts; and Murray Dickie, the Scottish tenor.

All but the baritone have relatively minor roles, but that of the baritone is big. He is Zarathustra. Mr. Herinx was fully in charge of the part, using his good-sized voice with artistry, phrasing with dignity, fully aware of the text in relation to chorus and orchestra. (The work was sung in the original German.) For some reason, the other soloists seemed to improve after the intermission. Certainly Miss Lafayette sounded more comfortable. She must have been terribly nervous at the beginning.

The chorus, trained by Jonathan Dudley, was responsive but often shrill. The hall? As for Mr. Scherman, he conducted in his usual manner, with great good will and very little in the way of subtlety. He always has been a puzzling case; a conductor of basically fine musical instincts who simply cannot transmit his ideas. Part of the trouble is physical - a lack of co-ordination between arm and movements stiff and unresponsive. The same story about his conducting last night has to be told yet again.

Writing in the New York Post, Harriett Johnson expresses very similar views:-

"Teeming with Wagnerian techniques, and less so with impressionistic influences, the music still expresses a strongly personal genius. Delius' choral writing is luxurious, sometimes too much so when, as often, there is a big chorus exhaling ecstasy while the soloists compete against it. The latter sang valiantly but their lives were lost in what became simply a "mass of sound."

"Nonetheless the overall effect was glorious and the inspiration of the music unquestioned. There is extraordinary variety and urgency in its ideas and fascination in its instrumentation. The voices dance and they meditate all with varying effulgence. Nietzsche's "Superman" is the solo baritone and he sings eleven philosophical soliloquies, a kind of multiple Hans Sachs in concert.

"The Mass of Life" should be repeated. We hope that Scherman will strive for more sensitivity in blending of his orchestra and chorus with the soloists; for more transparency; for more intensity and imagination in the lyrical portions. These latter were too casually sung and played, as if those performing were unaware of Nietzsche's depth."

In fairness it is necessary to give the contrary view of the critic in the World Journal Tribune, Alan Rich:-

"Revivals of long-forgotten musical scores can tell us one of two things. Either we're pretty stupid to have allowed such-and-such a work to gather dust for so long, or we're pretty smart. Last night at Philharmonic Hall, Thomas Soherman gave the first local performance in over 25 years of Frederick Delius' "Mass of Life" and clearly illustrated proposition No. 2.

In attempting to draw a large-scale choral work from some of the juicier passages in Nietzsche's "Also sprach Zarathustra," Delius allowed himself to fall into a trap that many before him had prepared. One can easily mistake such a text as an apt subject for musical depiction, but actually there is no room left between the words for music. To set such high-flown verbal lyricism is merely to push it over the brink to bathos and, in Delius' case I am very much afraid, to boredom.

He tried many things in this, his most ambitious work. Much of it is clearly under the shadow of Wagner, but even this is misinterpreted. Wagner had the wisdom to let his powerful surging harmonic manner stand for itself, and created texts which allowed enough air-space for the music to occupy its rightful position. To Wagnerize Nietzsche is to create a double image. (And remember that Nietzsche himself came to regard "Carmen" as closer to his own musical vision than Wagner.)

For the rest, there is much music in the traditional English choral-society style, but Elgar did this sort of thing better. The tragedy in "A Mass of Life" is that there is so little in it of the pristine Delius, the quiet, subtle master of the soft and ravishing tone that suggests rather than hammers out. One of these few moments is the orchestral prelude to the section called "On the Mountains," but these few minutes hardly redeem an entire long evening of something else.

THE OPERAS OF DELIUS

On Friday January 6th the Society met at Holborn Public Libraries to hear Mr. Christopher Redwood talk on "The Operas of Delius." Mr. Redwood, who is Head of Music at a Boy's Grammar School in the East End, submitted a thesis on this subject while he was a student. His talk was divided into two parts: the first devoted entirely to "A Village Romeo and Juliet," and the second to a general comparison of all the Delius operas.

He began by asking his audience to listen carefully to a musical excerpt, and proceeded to play on the piano what sounded as if it was going to be "The Walk to the Paradise Garden." Half-way through, however, it took a different turning, and members were interested to learn afterwards that this was the original interlude between Scenes V and VI of "A Village Romeo and Juliet." Not so long as "The Walk to the Paradise Garden" (which was written at Sir Thomas Beecham's request to cover a difficult scene-change at the British premier in 1910,) it was nevertheless a charming piece of self-contained music. Mr. Redwood went on to point out that the reason why its famous successor seems to distill the quintessence of the Opera (to use a well-worn phrase) is because it is built up entirely on the various leitmotive occurring in it. These were illustrated in their various contexts, including the Opening-theme, the Love-theme, the Kiss-theme, and the opening bars of the love-dust in the 6th Scene. Members then listened once more to this familiar music, but starting from the end of the fairground waltz, and observed the skill with which Delius changes in so short a space from this merry scene to one of such poignancy. It was also observed that this interlude is only one of a number of very beautiful orchestral episodes, most of which are similarly based on leitmotive. The first half of the evening ended with the intermezzo between the second and third scenes, where Delius employs six horns off-stage to striking effect, and which reminded Mr. Redwood of the interlude "On the Mountains" from "A Mass of Life."

After the interval, Mr. Redwood began by examining the libretti of all Delius' operas. He outlined the plots of "Irelin" and "The Magic Fountain" and pointed out that, with the exception of the happy ending to the former work, the stories are virtually one and the same. That of "Koanga" is also similar, in that the plot circles round the quest by Koanga and Palnyra after their mutual happiness, which brings about their destruction. But the search now and in the subsequent operas is no longer after the tangible ("Silver Stream" and "Fountain of Eternal Youth",) but after the intangible, in the form of earthly love and happiness. The figures always move as if in the control of some unseen power, which is materialised in "A Village Romeo and Juliet" by the Dark Fiddler, who clearly embodies the compelling force of fate in the lives of Sali and Vrenchen. From this, the speaker formulated a list of requirements for the ideal Delius libretto.

In explaining the similarities of the plots, he referred to Heseltine's dictum of the composer to whom the libretto he eventually sets is only

".....convenient framework upon which (he) may construct a work whose emotional or psychic basis was already clearly defined in his mind before he lit on his subject. This explains the common phenomenon of the composer who wants to write an opera but spends years - fruitlessly as a rule - looking for a suitable libretto....."

and, it may be added, more often than not ends up by writing his own, as Delius did for his first two operas.

It came as a surprise to many members to learn that Delius originally intended to write a trilogy of operas; the first concerned with Red Indians ("The Magic Fountain",) the second with Negroes ("Koanga,") and the third with Gypsies (almost "A Village Romeo and Juliet.") All, we note, outcasts searching after an (almost) unattainable happiness, and singing of lost, joyful days. This information comes from correspondence between Delius and Mrs. Charles Edward Bell, which is now in Jackson ville Public Libraries, and this also throws light on the problematic proposed performances of "The Magic Fountain" at Weimar and Prague in the 1890's. Although nei her opera-house has any record of a Delius opera, there is a letter from the composer to Mrs. Bell, dated 15th July, 1896, which states: "'Watawa" is on the list for Weimar' ("Watawa was the original title of "The Magic Fountain.") There is also incontrovertible evidence in letters from Sinding to the composer that it was seriously considered for production at Prague. Despite Heseltine's implication that Delius withdrew the opera from Weimar as an Act of laudable self-criticism, Mr. Redwood suggested that there were probably a quite mundane explanation in both cases, such as financial restrictions, or a change of policy on the part of the management. Fortunately for us some of the music survives, as it was used in other works, and members listened to the Preludes to Acts I and II.

The speaker made the interesting point that although Delius' music undoubtedly matured as he grew older, unfortunately the subjects that he chose for his Operas became more and more realistic and contemporary at the same time. The effect of "Fennimore and Gerda" is not helped by a fatal telegram, and lines like "Sit down and have a cigar, my friend." As a consequence of this, the most successful opera is more likely to be near the middle of the group, rather than the last in chronological order. This brought us back to "Koanga" which, despite its Verismo moments, contains some beautiful writing, especially in the Third Act. As a final musical illustration, the audience listened to the end of this Act, the following Intermezzo, and the Epilogue.

OUR RECORD REVIEW.

As previously mentioned, we have asked Mr. Lyndon Jenkins to act as our gramophone critic and he had sent me his review of the recent recording of the Double Concerto. I told Mr. Jenkins I should like him to express his opinions

freely in his reviews and this one is printed without editorial interference, but this does not mean that I necessarily agree with its contents, of course.

It would be very interesting to have Mr. Warburg's comments as to the ungratefulness of the 'cello part and I invite any other members to send me their views on the various points raised.

THE DOUBLE CONCERTO.

I might as well admit at once that I am one of those people who regard this work as quite unsuccessful, both as a Double Concerto and as a work of Delius.

It is nearly fifteen years since I first met the score. Since then I have many times glanced at it with curiosity, but almost always without interest. Somehow it looks neither like a Double Concerto should look nor as a Delius score should look.

Though it has sufficient tunes (not all of them memorable by any means,) its chief defect lies without doubt in the often banal and quite ineffective writing for the solo cello. Looking at the score I remember I used to think that hardly had the cellist put bow to string than he was either struggling with bar after bar of ungainly triplets, fighting with double stopping or doing his best not to sound strained in a distinctly uncomfortable region of his instrument. The principal subject is rather ordinary in its four-squareness while the seven-bar tune (echoes of the Dark Fiddler!) is scarcely long enough to make its effect or to provide relief. The marching tune is distinctly orchestral and although the soloists' later embroidery of it is pretty, its character remains unaltered. The slow movement begins pleasantly and passes to a fine Delian melody (which becomes to me more Brahmsian as it goes on; surely this can't be the influence of that composer's masterpiece in the medium?). But the remainder of this section, before the very un-Delian lead-back to the recapitulation, sounds hesitant, even contrived, and not at all characteristic of the composer.

The most striking passages seem to me to be the opening eight bars and the closing peroration; the only places where I sense Delius is writing his sort of music. Those other passages I admire are invariably marred in some respect.

As to the record (on which the piece received a surprisingly respectful welcome, considering everything, from the critics) it cannot be pretended that it does wonders for the work. A pity, for there is quite a lot to admire. Raymond Cohen is uniformly excellent, I think, with a nice feeling for line and secure intonation, so important in Delius. Gerald Warburg certainly makes the most of his few worthwhile moments, but seldom can he have had to contend with such an ungrateful part. The recording is not good, though I gather a reasonable result is obtainable on large machines, and much of the orchestral detail is lost. The climaxes do not take well, sounding overblown, and there is not a great deal of pleasure to be had from the sound of the R.P.O. at any point. I would have liked to have seen Norman del Mar not quite so slavish in his regard for the markings in a score which sometimes looks almost Elgarian in its profusion of instructions. I am not convinced that all these marks help the Concerto, and venture to suggest that there are one or two places where a revised - even opposite - idea might have secured an improvement.

Becchan recommended a "Ruthless revision" of the solo parts; a thought which occurred to me while studying the work was that if the cello part were to be excised completely and the violin part adroitly altered, the result might be a passable violin concerto. (This suggestion is made only half-seriously, of course, and I fully realise that it is even less likely to be acted upon than Sir Thomas's!).

BEECHAM RE-ISSUES.

Our Secretary has been in correspondence with C.B.S. Records and the letters are reprinted here for members' information:-

"I am writing you on a matter which is troubling all Delians, and none more so than the Secretary of this Society!

Every Beecham recording is irreplaceable, but we are of course particularly concerned about the Delius works.

When I enquired about these in May last year, there then seemed a distinct possibility, from my telephone conversation with your office, that at least some of the Beecham records would be reissued on a cheap label, notably the 'Mass of Life'.

A private survey, admittedly of a limited nature, revealed some two years ago that this, of all records by 'English' composers was the most in demand for reissue. Paradoxically, it in fact has the added merit of being sung in German, which seems the most natural language for this work.

As it is, exorbitant prices are being asked in the second hand market for used recordings of the Mass (the former U.S. market having now apparently dried up,) so it hardly matters to the enthusiasts if the record is reissued at its full price.

I wonder if you would be good enough to let me have your observations? I need hardly say that 70% of my mail, especially from the United States, is concerned with the unavailability of recordings of the Delius Works."

A reply was received as follows:-

"Thank you for your letter of January 24th.

We very much want to re-issue the Beecham Delius records and had intended to start doing this last year. Unfortunately, owing to various problems connected with internal matters here and concerning production, marketing and other matters, the release of our new cheap label series was postponed. To date the situation has not yet been resolved. Nevertheless, when it has been, we do want to consider the question of the Delius records.

I can only conclude that as the record company who owns the treasure-house of Beecham material that we do most certainly want to re-release his recordings and that such a programme of releases would include works by Delius.

Should any development take place which I know will prove of interest to you, I will most certainly contact you.

"Quita Chavez"
Repertoire and Promotion Manager-
Classical."

A further approach was made to Miss Chavez immediately before the Society's Annual General Meeting. In reply she wrote:-

"Our plans to re-issue some of our Delius recordings have been held up and unfortunately, at the moment, I cannot give you any definite information on when they are likely to be carried out. I can, however, tell you that CBS have no plans to record any new performances of any of the Delius repertoire."

MIDLANDS BRANCH NEWSLETTER.

I am grateful to Mr. Kitching for the following report on the activities of the Midlands Branch during the latter part of last year -

"The first meeting of the season was held in November and consisted of a talk on the life of Delius by Dick Kitching. The talk was illustrated by slides of the places where Delius lived and the persons with whom he came in contact. Musical illustrations were interpolated showing Delius's progress from the early pieces (such as the Florida Suite) showing the influence of Greig, to the Songs of Farewell. Tribute was paid to Mr. Eric Fenby, without whose assistance the last works would never have been heard.

The second meeting (held in December) was not a Delius evening (cries of "sacrilege" were heard.) This was a talk by Mr. Peter Trotman on Ivor Gurney and was illustrated by songs sung by Margaret Trotman accompanied by Mr. Trotman. The talk also included several poems by Gurney, and it seems that he was almost as much a poet as a composer. The history of his short, sad life makes the life of Delius seem a bed of roses in comparison. The evening was an eye-opener to several members not familiar with Gurney's songs, and we are most grateful to Peter and Margaret Trotman for an outstanding meeting."

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