

PROGRAM NOTES

The Collegial Champion of Indigenous Peoples

On November 11, 1898, seven days after the British colonial triumph over the French at the battle of Omdurman (Sudan), Charles Villiers Stanford stepped forward to conduct the premiere of a young black composer's new cantata, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, in a concert at the Royal College of Music in London (RCM), to great acclaim. The success of the music, like that of the original poem from the moment it appeared in the 1850s, was instant. The African ancestry of its composer, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and Longfellow's epic of alien worlds and culture clash clearly struck a chord at this especially intense moment of late Victorian enthusiasm for the empire. High public expectations following the huge success of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* led to the completion of the composer's Longfellow trilogy, although *The Death of Minnehaha* and *Hiawatha's Departure* never achieved the same degree of renown.

As a composition student at the RCM, Coleridge-Taylor had exhibited extraordinary promise. The "assured technique and stylistic panache" of his Brahmsian chamber works drew praise from his teacher Stanford. The rhythmic vitality, harmonic colour and melodic invention (which reveals a strong modal character) of his compositions also confirm the influence of his idol Dvořák. These characteristics quickly found a natural affinity with the poetry of Longfellow, who was greatly popular at the time. Coleridge-Taylor later claimed that he had been attracted to the poem by the trochaic tetrameter (the Finnish source for Longfellow later inspired Sibelius) and by the strange euphony of the Indian names (Longfellow had an enthusiasm for ethnographic detail, as the poem's footnotes make clear).

The cult of the exotic was then at its height, and the romantic appeal of the Amerindian powerful. In Coleridge-Taylor it became entangled with his endeavor to express his African identity, which he did, following Dvořák's example, by modelling some of his works on negro subjects and melodies of the black and Amerindian peoples.

Coleridge-Taylor's concerns, as expressed in the *Hiawatha* trilogy and later works, lay not with the glorious deeds and self-doubts of the conquerors but with the dignity of the oppressed races. After 1900, Coleridge-Taylor was already seeking new ways to address the issues of culture contact raised by Longfellow's epic poem. Understanding the pain of black history—the separation of forced migration and the social dissolution it entailed—is never far from the core of the best of Coleridge-Taylor's later work and he has been described as 'the collegial champion of indigenous peoples'. It is within this context that we might understand his sympathy with the *Hiawatha* legend.

In addition to composing, Coleridge-Taylor was an excellent conductor and was described in 1910 by New York orchestral players as the 'black Mahler'. He made three successful visits to the USA, in 1904 and 1906 at the invitation of the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society, founded in Washington, DC, in 1901 for black singers, and in 1910 at the invitation of Carl Stoeckel for the Litchfield Festival, Connecticut.

Coleridge-Taylor and his music held great importance to contemporary pan-Africanists like W.E.B. Du Bois (a Harvard-educated sociologist and historian campaigning for racial equality in the United States) who were looking for cultural routes through which African Americans might find their place within the wider society. For the young composer was clearly a central and acclaimed figure in Britain: in spite of being black, and thus visibly alien, Coleridge-Taylor had become part of the national musical consciousness, as the acclaim for *Hiawatha* proved. In his essay "The Immortal Child," Du Bois contrasted Coleridge-Taylor's success in Britain with the corrosive impact of racism on black talent in the United States. Du Bois also attended a performance of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, conducted by the composer, before a huge and enthusiastic audience at the Crystal Palace near the composer's birthplace of Croydon: 'It was a moment such as one does not often live', wrote Du Bois: 'It seems, and was, prophetic'.

Why Not Learn Sanskrit?

Sometime in 1899, a young trombonist and aspiring composer walked into the British Museum's Reading Room, requested several books, and waited in anticipation. He had come to peruse the ancient *Rigveda*, works by the fifth-century classical poet and dramatist Kālidāsa—particularly *Meghadūta* (The Cloud Messenger), and the great Hindu epics, *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. These works had, in translation, appealed to him so strongly that he wanted to set them to music, but he found the words of available English versions stilted and unnatural. He was looking forward to getting a better—truer—sense of these texts by going directly to the sources. As he glanced around the room, he saw venerable scholars deep in their studies of 'Oriental' languages. The attendant staggered in with a huge pile of volumes for him but, to his dismay, they were all in the original Devanāgarī script. He crept out of the room, feeling, as he later recounted to his daughter, more of a fool than he had ever felt in his life.

The aspiring composer was 25-year-old Gustav von Holst who was by this time 'so fired by enthusiasm that difficulties only spurred him on, and he set to work to study Sanskrit'. In spite of a gruelling touring schedule with the Carl Rosa Opera Company he devoted as much time as he could to his Sanskrit language and literature studies, which he embarked on at the School of Oriental Languages with Dr Mabel Bode. His bookshelves filled up with epic Indian stories, poems, and hymns, all of which, judging from the copious annotations and page-wear I've been privileged to view (at St Paul's School for girls where he taught), he read and studied closely. Pencilled marginalia in Devanāgarī script, along with an annotated copy of *Meghadūta* in Sanskrit, reveal that he was developing a working knowledge of the language. He later recalled: 'As a rule I only study things that suggest music to me. That's why I worried at Sanskrit.'

All this Indic study did indeed suggest a great deal of music to him. In 1899, he began writing an epic opera, *Sita*, for which he wrote a libretto based in part on his own attempts at translating an episode from the *Rāmāyana*, and in (larger) part on translations by the renowned scholar Ralph T. H. Griffith. *Sita* was finally completed in 1906, but he was not happy with the musical language and later referred to it as a bout of 'good old Wagnerian bawling'. Holst then turned his attentions, for the better part of the next six years, to the *Rigveda*. During this period, he also composed a chamber opera entitled *Sāvitrī* (from the *Mahābhārata*), and two settings of poetry by Kālidāsa. The first, *The Cloud Messenger* (1910), based on the much-admired lyric poem, *Meghadūta*, is the largest choral work of his 'Sanskrit period'. 'Including translation,' he recalled, 'it took me seven years—7 happy years of course.'

Meghaduta is the lament of an exiled *yaksha* (a benevolent nature-spirit) who is pining for his beloved on a lonely mountain peak. When, at the beginning of the monsoon, a cloud perches on the peak, he asks it to deliver a message to his love in the Himalayan city of Alaka. Much of the poem, composed in an extremely graceful metre, consists of a description of the landmarks, cities, and sights on the cloud's journey. This elicited from Holst a wonderfully pictorial musical canvas which evokes every detail of Kalidasa's poetic imagery – from the sweeping movement of the cloud itself to the temple scene in which musicians gather to sing, their pace gradually becoming more frenetic until the God *Siva* himself descends for the Cosmic Dance—evoked by a characteristically Holstian 'ostinato' with its driving rhythms and shifting accents (several years before Stravinsky!).

Thus, while the language of *Meghadūta* is often late-romantic, with Wagnerian recurring motives (including a reference to Tristan and Isolde's 'yearning'), there are striking glimpses of the modernist traits Holst was pioneering in the 1900s. In the postlude, sparse, oscillating harmonies brilliantly depict the dissolution of the monsoon cloud itself as it floats into the distance, prefiguring the eerie harmonic alternation of the planet 'Saturn' – and even that famous fade-out of *The Planets* when (for the first time in musical history), disembodied voices are 'lost in the distance' at the end of 'Neptune, The Mystic'. These moments where Holst's music seems to *become* the mystical material of its subjects, are, in their rich intertextuality, among the most moving in all of his work.

—Dr Nalini Ghuman

(with Coleridge-Taylor content drawn from Dominique René de Lerma, Paul Richards, and Stephen Banfield)

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For more on the Indian influence on Holst and other English composers, see her new book, *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2014), selected as the BBC's "Music Books Choice" and by the *Times Higher Education* as "a good read."