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DELIUS'S ADVANCE TO MASTERY

by John W. Klein

From the very outset of his career, undeterred by an incomprehension that might have crushed the spirit of even the most indomitable fanatic, Delius was convinced not only of his sacred vocation as a musician but of the supreme dignity of what Bizet termed 'this celestial art'. For on one occasion he wrote: 'Music is a cry from the soul! It is a revelation, a thing to be reverenced'. Perhaps no modern composer reveals so lofty and disinterested a conception of his art.

With indefatigable persistence he experimented in every possible sphere. Nevertheless, it is in the nature of the most ironical of paradoxes that, like Tchaikovsky, he was most intensely absorbed by the very medium that otherwise filled him with a distaste verging on nausea. 'The theatre was the chief passion of his life', Sir Thomas Beecham once asserted. Though, fundamentally, a lyricist, Delius was in constant pursuit of the ideal drama of the human soul in conflict with implacable destiny. Even in a choral work such as *A Mass of Life* there are some overwhelmingly moving moments in which this sublime drama is partly realized.

His early operas, *Irmelin and Koanga*, already display a remarkable sense of atmosphere, but too frequently they tend to go about their work as though the stage were not their proper home. *Irmelin* is a dream opera steeped in lyrical beauty, which expresses the rapture of the lovers whilst the more prosaic characters stubbornly refuse to come to life. *Koanga*, on the other hand, is a great step forward, for it is a vital and colourful work, with a hero who is no longer just a dream figure but at moments a suffering human being. His defiance of his white tormentors at the end of the second act is powerfully dramatic. Nevertheless, there is little point in denying that the poet C. F. Keary provided Delius with too stilted and melodramatic a libretto, the very inadequacy of which compelled the composer in future to rely exclusively on his own undeveloped literary judgment. For in the 'book' of *Koanga* there is neither distinction of style nor real dramatic continuity, but unfortunately something that in the theatre is almost invariably a considerable handicap: an anti-climactic epilogue. This unfortunate device is liable to weaken the final effect of an opera: only in Britten's *Billy Budd* and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* does it appear completely justifiable. It probably wrecked the chances of production (at any rate in England) of so fine a work as Alan Bush's medieval tragedy, *Wat Tyler*.

There was no such fatal handicap in Delius's third opera, *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (for we are forced to ignore the unpublished *Magic Fountain* and the abortive *Margot la Rouge*, which Delius himself subsequently dismembered and disowned). It had, indeed, taken the composer no fewer than ten years of unremitting labour as well as tireless reading before he at last alighted on the right subject: Gottfried Keller's *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. This is one of the great short stories of all literature; but, curiously enough, though so uniquely musical both in theme and conception, it had, after more than thirty years, never tempted a composer. Now at last it dazzled, and then obsessed, an artist whose music was

even more ideally suited to enhance its emotional appeal than that of Debussy to provide a delicate substance to Maeterlinck's shadowy *Pelléas*. Delius's insight into Keller's story was little short of uncanny, and yet his work was probably too boldly original to satisfy the poet who, if he had lived to witness its production, might have approved as little as did Maeterlinck of Debussy's score.

Delius's *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is, despite its limitations, one of the very rare masterpieces of the English lyrical stage, possibly the most unjustifiably neglected of all great operas. For when it was first performed at Covent Garden in 1910, and subsequently revived in 1920, it was brushed aside as an insipidly pretty little idyll totally unsuited for the stage, merely a series of languid duets. This was an extraordinary aberration on the part of the majority of the critics. To describe *A Village Romeo* as merely languid or even monotonous is scarcely less perverse a judgment than Bernard Shaw's summing-up of *Carmen* as 'a delicately flimsy little work lacking in vitality'. Perhaps in the circumstances I may be forgiven for quoting from an article of mine in *Musical Opinion* as far back as 1922. I then wrote: 'I can remember only one modern opera that strikes me as the work of a truly refined nature: Delius's *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. It is a noble work; there is always reticence in the love passages'.

And yet—despite my conviction that this is the most exquisitely poetic creation of one of the greatest individualists of modern music—my own attitude to his masterpiece remained for a while slightly ambivalent. As music *A Village Romeo* was superb, but what about it as drama? Occasionally I asked myself: should theatrical effect in opera be so ruthlessly sacrificed to the masterly creation of an atmosphere of subtle beauty? From a purely dramatic point of view the opera at times scarcely seemed to do justice to its remarkable literary source. In Delius's limping libretto the most gripping or significant incidents are either deliberately or undiscerningly omitted. The result, at first sight, might give even a discriminating scholar an impression of almost lackadaisical ineffectiveness. Professor Dent, an ardent admirer of Keller's genius, who considered his story 'a work of sustained beauty, with a wonderfully picturesque sense of atmosphere and environment', was outraged at what he stigmatized as Delius's congenital inability to mould a drama or even to get to grips with concrete realities.

Let us take one scene in particular: the tragic meeting of the young lovers after years of separation caused by the jealous hatred of their boorish parents. An extract from this crucial scene may be worth quoting, for its omission is possibly a clue to the mysterious neglect of one of the loveliest of all operas. Here it is: 'The two old farmers rushed towards a little wooden bridge that led across a brook. Thunder growled dully as the two frenzied men reached the bridge and drove their fists into each other's haggard faces. By now their children had come up. Sali leapt forward to stand by his father so that he might help him to get the better of his loathed enemy. But at that moment Vreli flung her arms impulsively around her father, tears streaming from her eyes, as she looked imploringly at Sali. Involuntarily he laid his hand on his own father's arm. And, suddenly, through a rift in the clouds an evening ray lit up the girl's features. Sali gazed at the face he had once known so well, and which was now quite different and so much lovelier. Vreli noticed his surprise and flashed him a swift smile through her terror and her tears. Pulling himself together, he dragged his father away. But the children, hardly daring to breathe, were still as death; unseen by their elders, they quietly clasped hands as they turned away, and their fingers were cool and moist with the rain and the fish.'

Now why did Delius throw away such a superb dramatic opportunity as this? For it is by far the most moving situation in the Swiss poet's beautiful story: it is virtually its emotional climax. And yet somehow it was typical of the composer that he should coldly ignore it, whilst he and his devoted wife with infinite patience drastically pruned Keller's masterpiece. Practical reasons may of course have prompted him; possibly he felt it was unstageworthy. Or did he perhaps resent so crude an intrusion of violence on the stage, particularly when it was linked with the dawn of love? Who can tell? Unfortunately he replaced this gripping scene by an extremely nondescript one of his own invention: Sali's awkwardly contrived visit to Vreli's house, by far the weakest scene in the whole opera—a stretch of charming but slightly characterless music that makes us for a moment doubt whether Delius was, indeed, justified in choosing the theatre as his favourite medium.

In fact, the opera lacks the vivid contrasts and rewarding situations that are part and parcel of Keller's tale. Consequently German critics have condemned Delius almost as brutally for mutilating the Swiss poet's delicately designed work as they have denounced Gounod for debasing *Faust* or Thomas for vulgarizing *Wilhelm Meister* in his *Mignon*. They have even ventured to stigmatize his libretto as 'a literary crime'. In a story full of telling incident only a single conventionally dramatic scene survives: the struggle between Sali and Vreli's almost demented father. Here for once Delius does not recoil from brutal conflict: the situation is dealt with vigorously, if just a trifle in accordance with the time-honoured procedure of some modern operatic composers with whom the reticent Delius had relatively little in common. In many respects he is uncannily like Janáček, a musician of equal genius who would also at times perversely insist on avoiding or scamping the *scène-à-faire*.

Delius put his whole heart and soul into this strange, uneven and yet at times miraculously beautiful opera. Well might he cry aloud as he marvelled at his own achievement: 'No great work of art has ever come into the world save as the result of years of earnest, unremitting endeavour on the part of its creator'. And a great work of art it undoubtedly was, though it starts frailly enough. Even in the fourth of the six scenes all Delius's characteristic faults and virtues again emerge: his sometimes disconcerting lack of grip and incisive characterization, but even more strikingly his almost voluptuous yearning after beauty. The pathetic little heroine Vreli begins by bewailing her dismal future, for her father has been taken to an asylum, robbed of his reason by Sali's almost fatal blow. Her naive song of loneliness is perhaps too prettily reticent: here is that excessive refinement of delicacy that has occasionally disconcerted, even dismayed, Delius's most fervent admirers. This is lyrical music in a particularly restricted sense of the term, possibly the most insidious malady of the English operatic stage. For at such a crucial moment Delius does seem to be—as Professor Dent vehemently maintained—merely the spectator of his tragic story.

Nevertheless, a wonderful surprise is in store for us, for unpredictability was the hall-mark of Delius's genius. Just when one is perhaps a bit inclined to yawn, he will suddenly transport one, and nowhere more thrillingly than here. For the moment Sali appears, humble, conscience-stricken and adoring, the atmosphere changes: the pallid figures that previously were scarcely flesh and blood now assume a vivid and touching humanity. Nothing could surpass the exquisite tenderness of the concluding section of their little duet; from the lovers' tragic predicament a great musician distils the very essence of poignant sweetness.

However, as they wait patiently for the dawn, he tends increasingly to revert to the operatic composers he admired most of all: Wagner and Bizet. The result is, it is true, almost invariably effective, for he was a far more assiduous student of other men's scores than is generally realized; yet much of this music is hardly in his most personal vein.

Alone in the derelict cottage, the lovers dream the same wistful dream: that they are being married in the old church of Seldwyla. They hear a solemnly insipid hymn that Gounod in one of his weaker moments might not have disowned —this is certainly Delius at his least inspired, though the discerning German musicologist Oscar Bie stoutly insists on the contrary. It is, however, a real blot on a wonderful work. And yet the lovers awaken to music of a breath-taking beauty; then, in a strange burst of energy, they decide to spend the day at a boisterous fair where they meet with only sneers and jeers. Disconsolately they wander away to spend the night they know not where.

And now, as if suddenly confronted with a supreme challenge, Delius is once again at his most impressive. The famous *Walk to the Paradise Garden* is a superb epitome of all life's most poignant regrets: it remains one of the greatest interludes in opera, ranking with Berlioz's *Royal Hunt and Storm* in *The Trojans*. It is a pity to tear this interlude out of the context into which it fits so delicately and movingly.

For the scene that follows is no anti-climax, but one of the most entrancing masterpieces in modern opera. Rarely, indeed, has a composer flooded the stage with such a wealth of poetic beauty. Even before the curtain rises the vagabonds, with whom the lovers seek a precarious refuge, sing a plaintive song: 'Dance along, dance along, towards the setting sun'. No rough gipsies born of Keller's slightly uncouth imagination could ever have sung anything as delicately elusive as this; but how can we find the heart to carp? After all, no coarse factory workers would sing so ethereally in praise of tobacco as do the Sevillan girls in the masterpiece by Bizet Delius so passionately admired. Nevertheless, with these sturdy vagabonds he is not always entirely at his ease, though he endeavours to impart to them and their leader, the Black Fiddler, a certain robustness of utterance that is not altogether congenial. Boors, as we had already noticed in the early *Irmelin*, were never his strong point.

But when, finally, he is left alone with his dream lovers, how magically is he in his element. Sali and Vreli, feeling that they have been abandoned by the whole world, resolve to die. Justifiably, Gerald Abraham has criticized the melodramatic falsity of their decision; and yet such an ultra-romantic ending may claim one supreme merit: it stimulated Delius's imagination as a more plausible or less fatalistic conception would have completely failed to do. That, ultimately, must be its justification.

In fact, I know of no scene in modern opera that for rare and exquisite pathos surpasses the lovers' suicide in *A Village Romeo*. Peter Warlock was right in asserting that it was 'the most beautiful thing' that Delius had ever achieved. Sali murmurs: 'To be happy one short moment and then to die', and the intensity of his emotion subjugates us. Even the bitterness of death is transmuted into a tremulous ecstasy. And when he exclaims: 'See, the moonbeams kiss the woods', the music assumes a wistful tenderness that lingers, unforgettably, in our enchanted minds.

A barge moored to the river-bank seems to beckon to the doomed lovers. It is characteristic of them that, in their utter absorption in themselves, they do

not worry, as Keller's little farm children do, as to their right to take this boat. With a touch of reckless gaiety Vreli flings away her nosegay, and Sali, drawing the plug from the bottom of the barge, cries out: 'Thus I throw our lives away', one of the most moving farewells to life and love in all opera.

In the distance we hear again the boatmen's chant: 'Heigho, wind, sing long, sing low, travellers we a-passing by'. But now it sounds like a lament, for life is after all amazingly beautiful, and to be compelled to sacrifice it is infinitely tragic. All this Delius's music expresses with matchless beauty—and yet his opera ends in a spirit of atonement, for the lovers' faith in themselves remains untarnished.

A Village Romeo may not be a powerfully dramatic opera; but it is infinitely more than that, for it is one of the most heart-rending works ever devised for the stage. Even so caustic a critic as Professor Dent, who ruthlessly condemns the vaporous characters and the feebly contrived situations, praises Delius's 'marvellous genius'. No doubt the opera is, on the whole, even less dramatically conceived than Boughton's *The Immortal Hour*, but it makes that charming fairy-tale seem merely pretty. It is as other-worldly as *Pelléas*, but in comparison Debussy's masterpiece strikes one as a little contrived and manneristic. It is a great hymn to devoted love, like *Tristan* itself, for only in death do unhappy lovers find supreme fulfilment; and yet, beside it, does not Wagner's possibly greatest achievement appear just a trifle sensual and even exhibitionistic? The most chaste and reticent of operas, *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is, in a sense, also the most subtly and poetically tender.

Admittedly, it is a notoriously difficult work to produce, for the music very rarely goes out of its way to be operatically effective. Nevertheless, in that final scene so irresistible is its appeal that drama, in defiance of the rules, is consummately achieved. Several fine works completely off the beaten track have been performed during the last two or three years, but surely not one that is more worthy of revival. For not only does it reveal its author at his most personal but at his most fundamentally and majestically musical, greater even than the gifted poet whose masterpiece he had recklessly mutilated and yet somehow magically transcended.

DELIUS'S STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

by Anthony Payne

Looking at Delius's music in chronological order, we discover a pattern of development more continuous than an almost life-long reliance on the same technique might suggest. An increasing richness of chord structure, bearing with it its own subtle means of contrast and development, slowly but surely ousted more conventional methods; slowly, that is, apart from the startling jump with which his music suddenly acquired full stature, only to resume its steady progress. As a young man he was far from being the dreamer we might think; in fact, he was very much an adventurer, always on the move, and thoroughly cosmopolitan. We can well imagine that he had little time for contemplation, so