Delius's Stylistic Development

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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

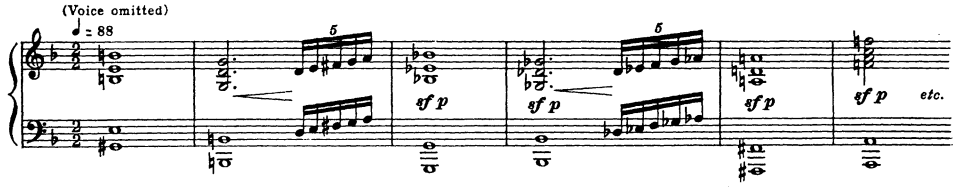
by Anthony Payne

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

that his attitude to beauty would be, at first, conventionally picturesque, and devoid of personal involvement. Bearing in mind that his avowed intention as a composer was to express his emotions, we need not be surprised that with as yet little opportunity for the tranquil recollection needed to crystallize personal emotion, his early music is content to lean on Grieg and early Wagner. As time passed, and his poetic vision deepened, his models served him less satisfactorily until he finally dropped them. This process, probably unconscious, might well have been speeded up if he had been less absorbed in self-expression, and more interested in abstract formal problems. It could possibly be argued, in comparing the early *Florida Suite* (1888-1890) with *Appalachia* (1902)—both seemingly inspired by the same events—that the later work is superior because Delius had found the right means of expression; I think not. The emphasis lies the other way in that he had at last realized to the full the awful transience of love and nature, and there are few composers in whom we feel less inclined to divorce matter from style.

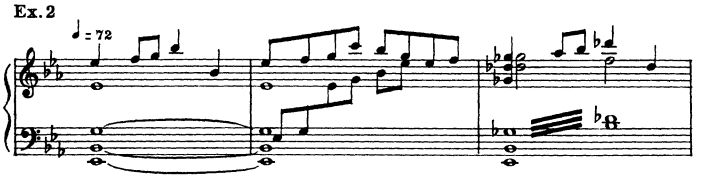
Delius's work prior to 1895 is of no more than passing interest. The opera *Irmelin* (1890-1892) is typical of this period of apprenticeship; one looks in vain for characteristic passages, finding Wagner (the 'Wanderer' motif) (Ex. 1),

Ex. 1



Grieg (Ex. 2) and nothing much else besides conventional harmony and modu-

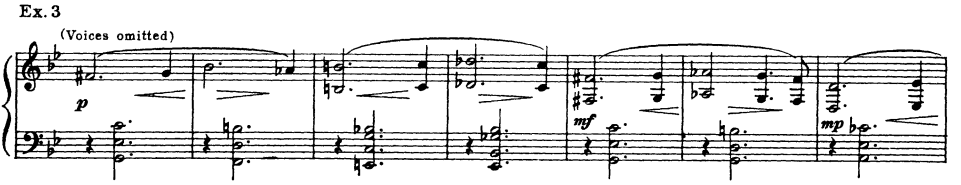
Ex. 2



lation, though it is interesting to see him writing his favourite laughing chorus, and showing an early predilection for 12/8 and 6/8 time signatures. The one harmonic purple patch of the opera occurs in the introduction to Act III, and was incorporated in the later *Irmelin Prelude* (1932). This charming piece is not to be confused with the introduction to the opera, but was put together at the end of the composer's life from various sources in the earlier work. It is especially interesting in the way it compresses the first thirty-seven bars of the opera into twenty-one bars without missing one point of interest.

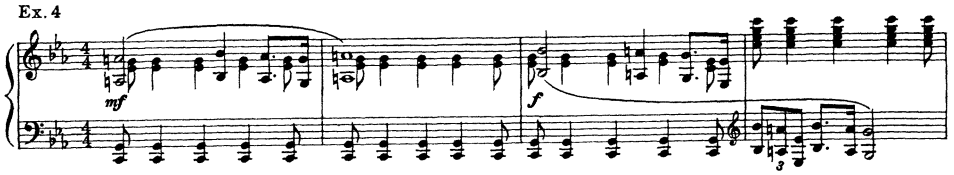
Koanga (1895-1897) shows a considerable stylistic advance. The chords are richer, the harmonic rhythm faster—there is nothing like the thirty bars of tonic harmony in the introduction to Act II of *Irmelin*—though the tendency is still to develop melodically in conventional sequences (Ex. 3). The libretto is a

Ex. 3



pot-boiler pure and simple, and the music matches it well, but not till the last scene do we feel it to be anything except effective theatre; as, for instance, the melodramatic strains of Ex. 4, which is on more than nodding terms with the

Ex. 4



verismo of, say, *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *Pagliacci*. The best music occurs at the moment when the orchestra transports us out of the flashback through which the story has been told, singing expansively of what is irrevocably lost; here we find Delius feeling his way towards the vein that he was soon to tap so surely. The broad horizon is no longer a painted scene but a consolation for what is gone.

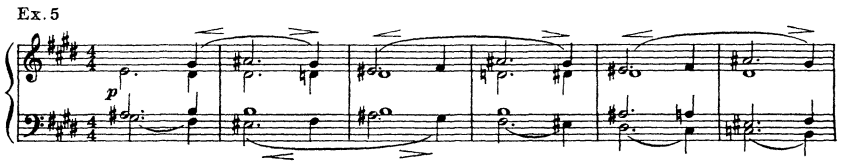
Paris—The Song of a Great City (1899), closes the early period and foreshadows the next in passages of contemplative beauty. Yet we lack the intense personal involvement of his great work. There is a rugged impersonality that fails to engage the heart. But this is no Straussian pictorialism, and *Paris* is his finest work to date, exciting with its sense of the very heartbeats of a great city. The orchestration, which does lean somewhat on Strauss, shows convincing mastery, but it is only conventionally brilliant, and, indeed, it could not be otherwise since the traditionally thematic nature of much of the work precludes the subtly graded impressionistic texture.

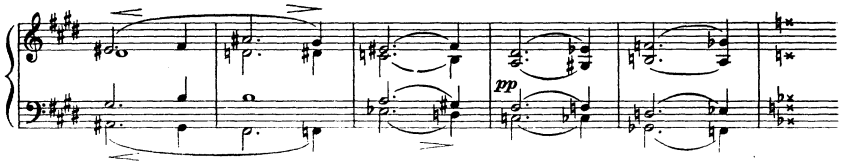
* * *

Delius had progressed much at this stage, but it is easy to be wise after the event, seeing his maturity foreshadowed in this or that bar. To the innocent observer, his next work, the opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, must appear as something totally unexpected and unique in its effect. It creates a world of particular beauty unapproached by anyone before or since. The reason for this astonishing achievement is difficult to see, and we must, I think, attribute much of it to the story, just remote enough in time and place to be beyond normal experience, and yet telling of ordinary farming folk. It avoids, except in a few instances, the melodrama of *Koanga*, which is too obviously drawn from life, as it does the opposite pole seen in the fairy-tale world of *Irmelin*. Most important, it tells poignantly of a search for unattainable bliss set against the consoling background of fine scenery; a factor calculated to bring out the best in a mind by now steeped with intense memories of his American years—years spent among people who had sung continually of the loss of all that is dear in life. (There is a theory that Delius spent much of his creative life trying to resurrect—in various terms—an incident in his youth, when he had sat listening to the sad songs of captive negroes floating to him on the evening air from a nearby plantation; an interesting counterpart to Mahler's experience with the barrel organ.)

Stylistically, *A Village Romeo and Juliet* is a remarkable achievement from the composer of *Paris* and *Koanga*. Compare Ex. 3. from the earlier opera with Ex. 5

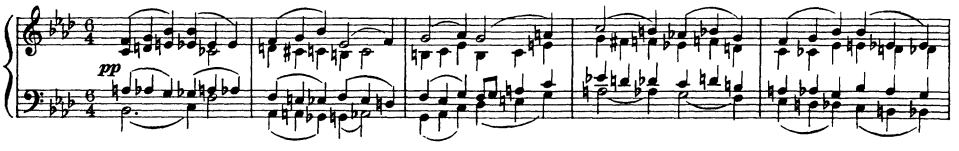
Ex. 5





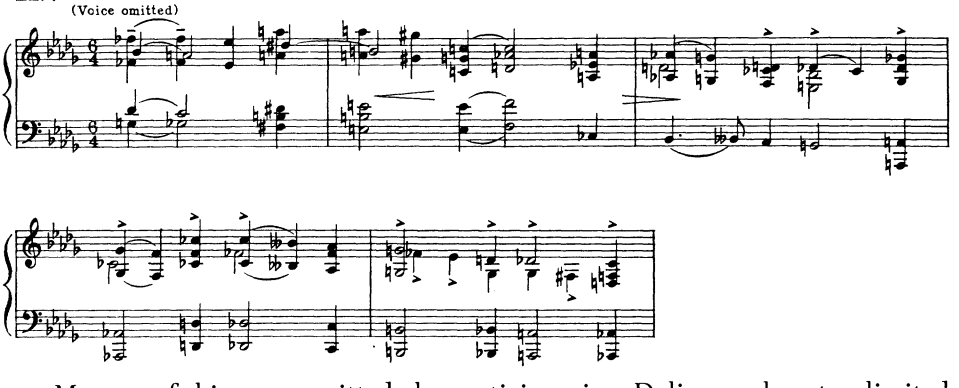
from the present work; basically, the same conception is expressed first in a plodding series of conventional resolutions and then with a texture that breathes like a live thing, while accepting discords in their own right. Neither has there been anything previously to resemble Ex. 6, with its fast harmonic rhythm and

Ex. 6



opposition of a diatonic top line to wayward chromatic accompaniments. It is worth dwelling for a moment on this particular technique which features in most of his subsequent work. From now on, phrase building and ultimately the overall structure of a work arise from tensions and relaxations depending on the extent to which positive key statements are avoided; chord progressions and melodic lines frequently pulling in opposite directions, as in Ex. 6. Tonal allusion is the basis of the style, any passing bias being for the key that best serves the composer's expressive ends, with no structural purpose in itself. We are some way from the traditional achievement of a related key with a well-planned return to the home tonic, yet this music depends on a background of traditional tonality to make its point. Tonality is sometimes suspended (Ex. 7) but never dispensed with.

Ex. 7



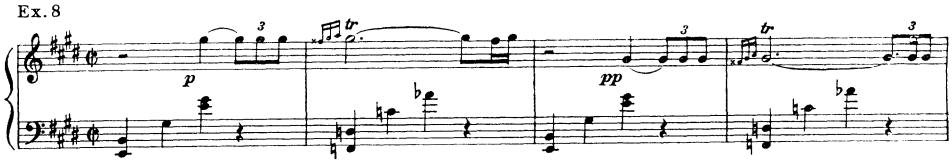
Mastery of this uncommitted chromaticism gives Delius an almost unlimited control of the broad paragraph. However short his melodic fragments might be they are carried by the flow of harmony and can achieve new significance at each repetition (see Ex. 5). This, together with his art of swift transition in mood or texture, marks him out as a large-scale composer. It is absurd of those who deny his ability in the bigger forms to cite his fondness for variations when accusing him of short-windedness. The theme and first six variations in *Brigg Fair* draw one finely judged, cumulative paragraph, effecting much more than the sum of the individual sections.

It is not surprising that in the face of this onslaught of poetic vision his technique sometimes proved unequal to the conception, though the lapses are surprisingly infrequent. Sali and Vreli's dream of their marriage brings forth uninteresting music; there is obtrusive realism in the hymn singing, and the vagabonds' chorus in the last scene is faintly ridiculous with the most annoying of all the composer's laughing songs. As for the rumbustuous fair scene here is something that Delius would not even have attempted in his later work; *Fennimore and Gerda* (1908-1910), stylistically his most mature opera, does no more than show Niels going off to the fair at Aalborg with his cronies. This is not to say he does not make something fairly satisfying out of the scene, and it is dramatically justified at Vreli's 'Why do they stare at us?', a forcible reminder that life for them in this world is impossible.

Appalachia shows no appreciable advance except in heralding his instrumental use of chorus vocalising, as often as not, on 'Ah!'. Cast in variation form, it progresses by fits and starts, and there are even such conventional character pieces as 'Waltz' and 'Quick March', so that it is not surprising to learn that the first sketches for the work date from the early nineties. The finale is content to draw the threads together with a '*Mastersingers*' gambit and understandably the orchestration, though brilliant, does not rise much above this sort of convention. A critic at the English première of the work said that the virtuoso orchestrator was not in evidence to the exclusion of poetic content; yet we do sense Delius showing what he could do in the way of an orchestral trick or two; something that does not occur again.

The next three works, *Sea Drift* (1903), *A Mass of Life* (1904-1905), and *Songs of Sunset* (1906-1907), complete the middle period of Delius's work in which, broadly speaking, his style is catching up with the astonishing demands being made on it. They are all three masterpieces, *Sea Drift* as flawless as anything of its kind. Stylistically, however, there are obtrusive elements, often only discernible to detailed scrutiny and always adequately fulfilling their functions, yet not to be found in later works. Take, for instance, Ex. 8 from *Sea Drift*.

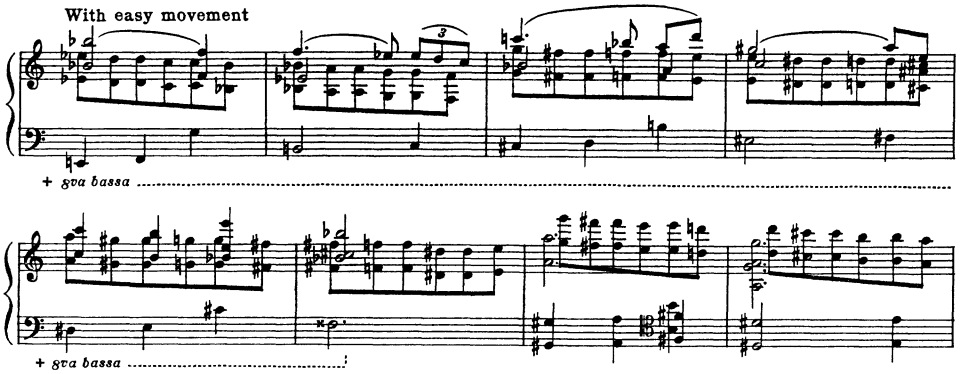
Ex. 8



The harmonic concentration of his late style would not allow this transitional move to be repeated unchanged except for the octave. Another point that marks out his middle period from later music is a tendency towards bold contrast, as, for instance, in the *Mass of Life*, the choral blaze of 'Arise thou glorious noontide', after a largely pianissimo orchestral interlude which is immediately followed by a subdued baritone solo. In later years, he would have achieved contrast more subtly, perhaps in a less contrived way, not discernible to the casual listener, who too frequently makes a summary condemnation of monotony. This lack of obvious contrast stems from the supreme confidence of a mature artist in his vision; it is seen in Beethoven's late quartets and the mellowness of late Brahms. So compulsive is the concept that tricks of oratory are no longer needed for its representation. There is a full measure of this mellow spirit in *Songs of Sunset*, yet it is still a transitional work, for technically it looks back with a copious use of Wagnerian appoggiaturas, especially in the soprano solo 'Exceeding sorrow'. It is among the

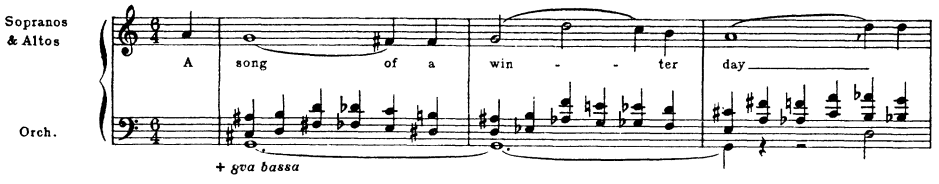
most luxuriant of Delius's works, which is not necessarily to say the most chromatic; rather does it lack the dissonance that braces, say *The Song of the High Hills* (Ex. 9)—a work equally rich in chromaticism. Incidentally, Delian vocal

Ex. 9



parts might appear to be doubled, as often as not, in the orchestra, but they have more independence than for example, Wagner's; and, when reading through a work, we must not be caught out by a point such as Ex. 10 (from *Songs of Sunset*),

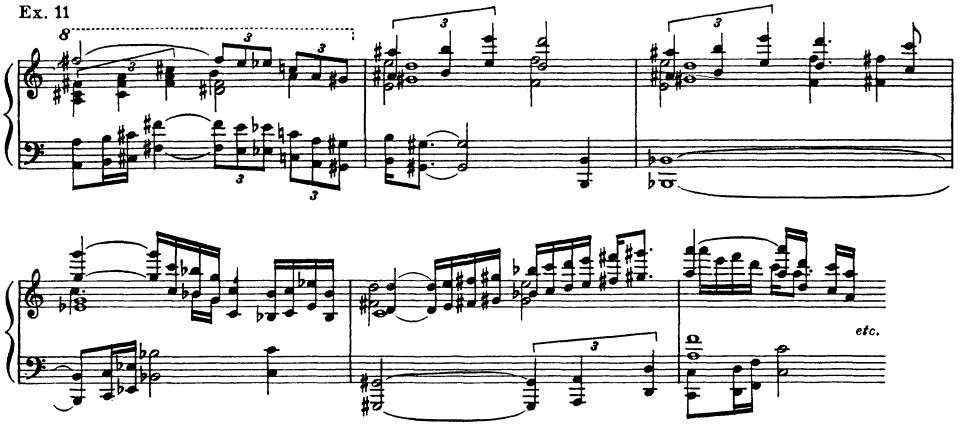
Ex. 10



where the sopranos and altos stabilize the orchestral parts and point the totally chromatic passage that follows, which would otherwise pall.

One other element to emerge from Delius's middle period would go unsuspected if our knowledge of his work were confined to the intimate nature poems. It is a steely exaltation that often takes the form of a strident climax with angular leaping figures in bass and treble. This music bursts gloriously upon us for the first time in *A Mass of Life*, and is often in evidence from then on, as in Ex. 11 from *A Song of Summer* (1930). Those to whom this side of Delius's

Ex. 11



nature is repellent sometimes accuse him of bad orchestration, especially in the layout of the brass parts. Inferior craftsmanship has nothing to do with it, however;

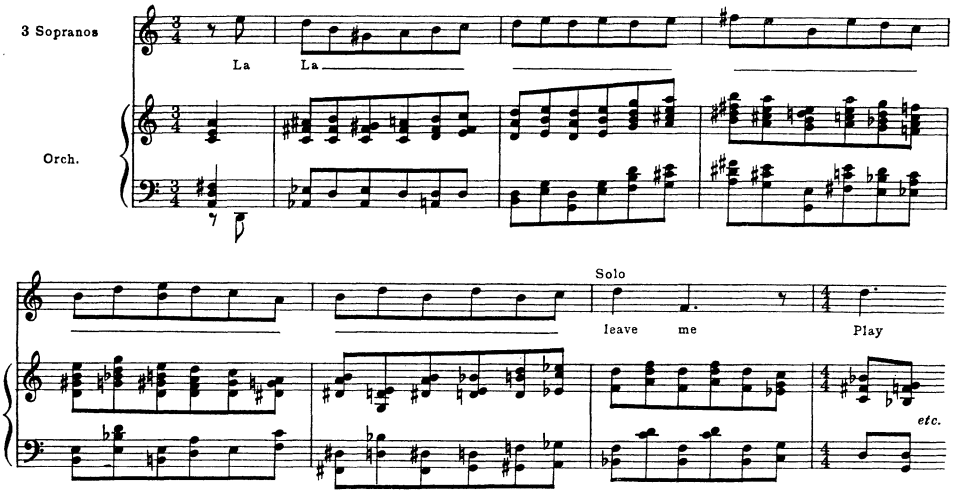
passages abound in his work where the loud tutti is treated sonorously, and we must accept this stridency as essential to his make-up.

* * *

Brigg Fair (1907) brings with it complete stylistic maturity: Grieg and Wagner have disappeared, and in the introduction we have the outcome of the nature music first seen in some parts of *Appalachia*: Delius's own fully developed brand of impressionism. This technique sounds completely unlike anything in Debussy, for his conceptions, by this time, had become too personal to allow of any expression that recalls other composers; yet, I think Debussy must take much of the credit for releasing this particular vein. Certainly two later works show a more positive debt to the Frenchman: compare *Nuages* from the orchestral *Nocturnes* (one bar after figure 4) with the closing bars of *Summer Night on the River*, and the third movement of *La Mer* (seven bars after figure 53) with the first movement of *North Country Sketches* (figure 9). The textural similarity is obvious enough in both cases, but what is more interesting is the way in which Delius stamps his personality on the acquisitions, the richer harmony, and in the first example, his own characteristic brand of melody sewn into the texture. There is no doubt that he owes more to Debussy in the less tangible aspects of technique than is usually admitted; but a diametrically opposed temperament leads him to use full-blooded harmony in even the most impressionistic passages, where Debussy seems to be searching for something unhealthily nebulous (and realised this danger to judge from his best works).

The increasing concentration, which is the hallmark of Delius's development, soon leads to radical chord juxtaposition, as in Ex. 12 from the last scene of

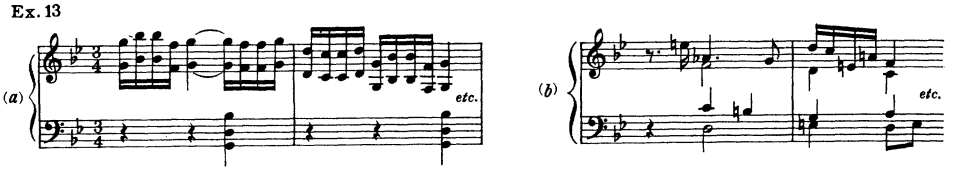
Ex. 12



Fennimore and Gerda, (1908-1910). Notice that the vocal parts keep the harmony in touch with G, but the accompaniment has no recognizable inner threads to guide the listener as in the sixths and thirds of Exx. 6 and 10. As a corollary of this we find, in the larger span of complete sections, contrasted textures and rhythms that in score appear so disconnected as to be incoherent. Examples are out of the question, but let the reader look at the last two movements of *North Country Sketches*, or the second half of *Eventyr*, and he will see for himself. That they do cohere in perfomance is due to the composer's sure grasp of the form of a work, or, as we have already stated, his judgement of tension and relaxation.

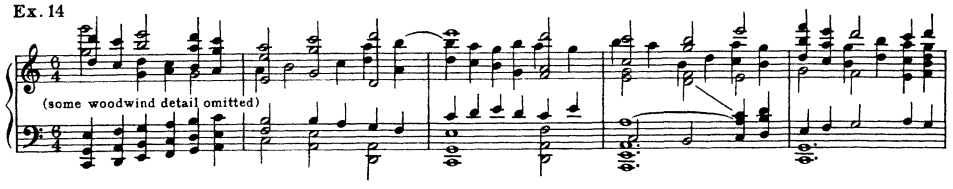
Discussion of the formal element in Delius's work, obviously indispensable in an assessment of stylistic growth, is extremely difficult. So far, his mature work has relied on a literary basis (*Sea Drift* shows just how unslavishly), or, in the cases of *Appalachia* and *Brigg Fair* a recognizable pattern of variations. His next work, however, *In a Summer Garden*, falls into neither category; superficially, it could be classed as a rondo (ABACA), and though not cast as a set of formal variations, it makes much use of the technique, as does a great deal of his work. See to what an extent the work progresses by varying the two figures given in Ex. 13. Yet this does not answer the real problem; Delius seems to have felt

Ex. 13



instinctively the overall span of a piece in emotional terms (tension and relaxation), which would immediately suggest to his inner ear the ebb and flow of harmonies. More obvious procedures such as motivic work, or some sort of adherence to a ternary scheme, would be integrated at a later stage in the creative process, often consciously sewn into the texture to point the harmonic ground swell. The fact is that the complete work can only be fully appreciated in terms of emotional impulse and conventional analysis tends to become a dreary catalogue. *In a Summer Garden* is on these terms well nigh flawless, but its immediate contemporary, the *First Dance Rhapsody* (1908), is the least successful of all Delius's works for full orchestra. It is a set of formal variations, based on a very catchy tune, but the various episodes clank, and the sense of flow that keeps *Brigg Fair* moving is absent; indeed, it appears sometimes that the composer is attempting to re-create an earlier achievement, something which he also attempted in *A Song before Sunrise* with little more success. There is, incidentally, an eastern flavour about the work unparalleled except in *Hassan*, which demands its local colour, and one episode could be inserted note for note into many a piece by Balakirev or Rimsky-Korsakov (six bars after figure 9). The *Dance Rhapsody* apart, however, each major work between 1908 and 1914 is worthy of detailed attention (each, with the exception of the *First Cuckoo*, neglected in the concert hall), yet we must confine ourselves to points of style. It is a tribute to the flexibility of this style that, while seemingly having reached the utmost pitch of refinement, it can still accommodate new elements. There are the unobtrusive, but undeniable Debussyisms already cited, and passages such as the following from *The Song of the High Hills* (1911-1912), Ex. 14, which is a perfect foil to the stronger type of

Ex. 14

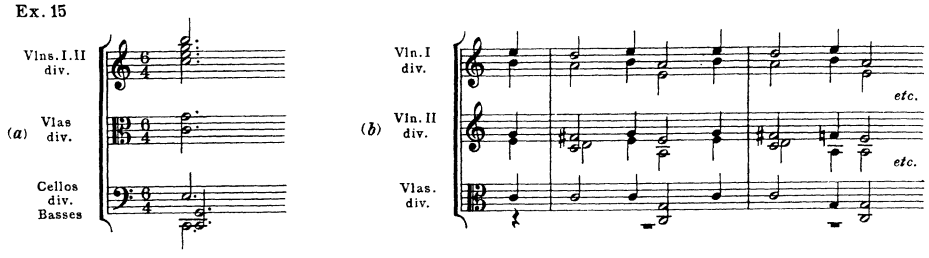


chromaticism used in this work, and makes an interesting comparison with the softer diatonicism found in the lush surroundings of *Songs of Sunset*. (Many not knowing the passage could be forgiven for attributing it to Vaughan Williams.) This particular work is considered by many not especially sympathetic to the

composer to be among his very finest pieces, yet it is not faultless; I do not complain about the entry of the unaccompanied choir, which I am sure careful conducting can make ethereal enough, but of the strenuous passages based on material shown in Ex. 9. Certainly, the spirit labours here, but Delius's technique cannot afford to do the same; extensions of the bass figure are over long, and no headway is made with the theme which too often turns back upon itself.

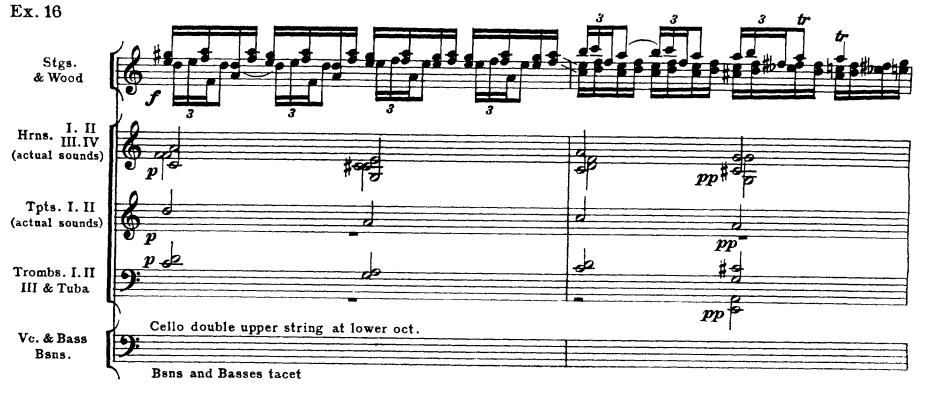
It is remarkable that at the same time as this powerful visionary work he should be producing the first of the smaller intimate pieces for which, at the present time, he is probably best known: *Summer Night on the River* (1911) and *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* (1912). Both rely almost exclusively on his looser variation technique, and *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* especially is typical of the best known Delian orchestral manner: strings divided into ten or more parts with expressive thematic snippets from the woodwind soloists. It might appear on casual acquaintance with this type of score that success depends on inventing rich chords at the piano, and dividing the strings into enough parts to account for each note. Look, however, at the opening of this piece (Ex. 15a) and notice that only at the top is there any density, while the remaining space consists of fifths and sixths, a chord conceived in terms of string sonority. Then consider how most people would score the bars (Ex. 15b); I doubt whether many

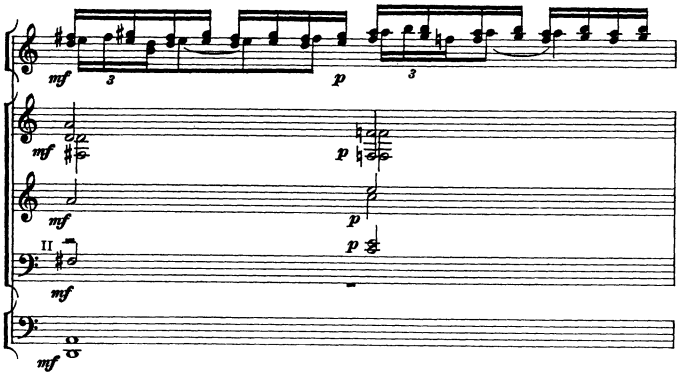
Ex. 15



would arrive at Delius's solution of the problem, whose subtly placed double stops are not needed from the point of view of completing the harmony, but give a tang to the down beats, so that the passage swings along buoyantly. Scoring on the lines of a note per part would entirely rob the passage of its springtime freshness. Such sensitive regard for texture is to be found throughout Delius's mature writing. See how he deploys his brass section in Ex. 16 from the last movement of the *North Country Sketches* (the dynamic markings are all-important). The first three chords are given life by the close position of the two trombones. Then with a drop from *p* to *pp* the lower brass makes its entry; but with a rise

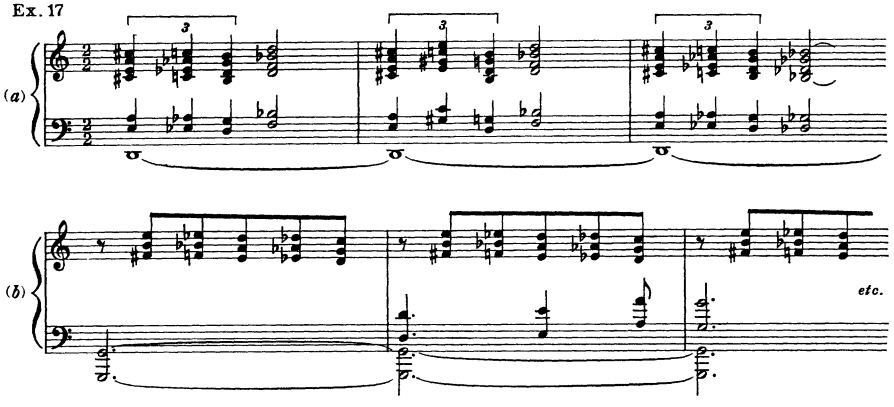
Ex. 16





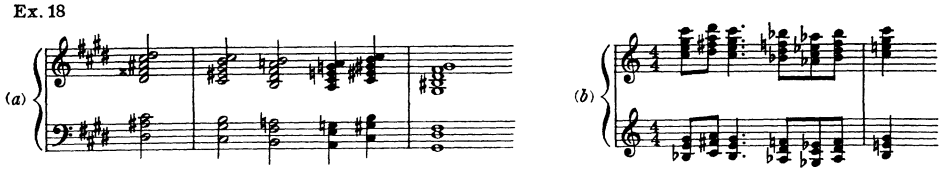
to *mf*, when, conventionally, the heavy brass would justify itself, it drops out, to be replaced by bassoons and low strings. Finally, with perfect timing, the tensest chord of the passage brings in the second trumpet, although the dynamics have dropped again to *p*. The work as a whole is one of the composer's most highly organized scores, a mine of information on his orchestral methods, and some of the loveliest music he ever wrote. It is also worth noticing in the first movement two new stylistic elements (Exx. 17a and 17b). The consecutive triads are almost

Ex. 17



certainly another legacy from Debussy, while the fourths in 17b are probably subconsciously divorced from dominant discords; this view is later endorsed by their behaviour, for they do, indeed, become part of a long series of dominant thirteenths. Interestingly enough Delius rarely uses long strings of identical chords in this manner, as Debussy does in, for instance, *Le Cathédrale Engloutie*, (Ex. 18a), though he does, in his late work, show a penchant for consecutive dominant sevenths (Ex. 18b), but, as will be seen, they are always in the third

Ex. 18



inversion, giving a peculiarly characteristic sound.

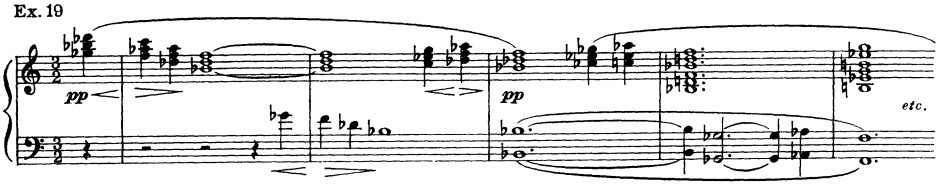
The next few years show Delius taking a rather surprising interest in the traditional sonata and concerto forms; forms that had engaged him on only three previous occasions: an unpublished violin sonata (1892), the first violin sonata

(original version) (1905), and the piano concerto (1897-1906). We must not expect the subtle interplay of the classical examples in which key and thematic usage, completely alien to Delius's style, to play a great part. To a large extent, he remains true to himself and, to single out the violin concerto (1916), gives us something very like a tone poem with a solo violin as the protagonist. Very properly recognizing the monotony of continual solo domination, he made more advanced plans and more contrived contrast than was natural; the result is much lovely music, but an understandable formal stiffness. Apart from the luxurious closing pages and odd incidents like Ex. 18b, the violin concerto could easily be mistaken for middle period Delius, when bold contrast was more the order of the day. In the sonatas, lack of an orchestral palette to bring his harmony to life places the top line in ascendancy. The result, in the cello sonata (1917), at least, is a triumph, the one example in Delius's work of melody carrying the day. Quotation is useless, such is the span of rhapsody; it is sufficient to say that the cello is not silent for more than a dozen bars, and sings little that is not derivative.

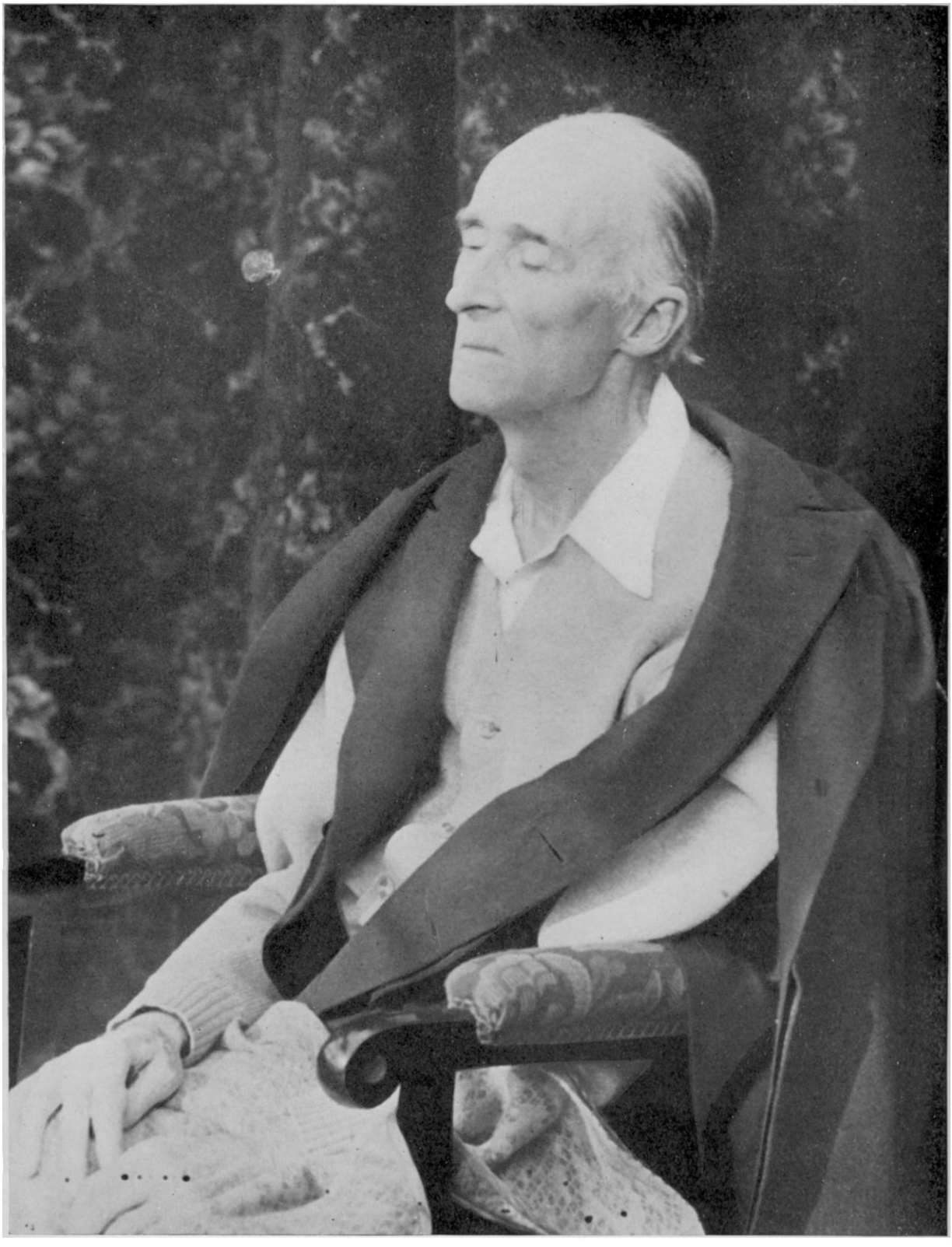
Eventyr, written in the same year, seems to return to the less involved spirit of his early work, yet uses the mature technique. It is a mysterious and powerful evocation of the spirit of Norwegian folklore, remarkable for its full virtuosic orchestration (especially in wind and percussion) which is completely subordinated to the expressive design.

Apart from these two works, his music, after the high water mark of *North Country Sketches*, declines both in sustained quality and quantity. *A Song before Sunrise* is typical; after an attractive opening and some fine early dawn brooding, Delius seems to lose his spontaneity and very uncharacteristically recapitulates the opening section note for note. It is fairly obvious that his physical deterioration was making composition more and more difficult, and in 1925 work stopped altogether. Aged sixty-three, shortly to become a hopeless paralytic, blind, and suffering from racking muscular spasms, his contemporaries can be forgiven for thinking that the spring had dried up permanently. But Delius had one last card up his sleeve; with the help of Eric Fenby, who offered his services as amanuensis, he came back to life. First, there was the dictation of revisions of old scores for the 1929 Delius Festival, and later, with the rapport completely established, the achievement of a full-length masterpiece, *Songs of Farewell* (1930-1932), which, although rich in chromaticism, is, nevertheless, the least luxurious of his choral works. It is bracing and exultant with, in places, an almost Holstian clarity (Ex. 19).

Ex. 19

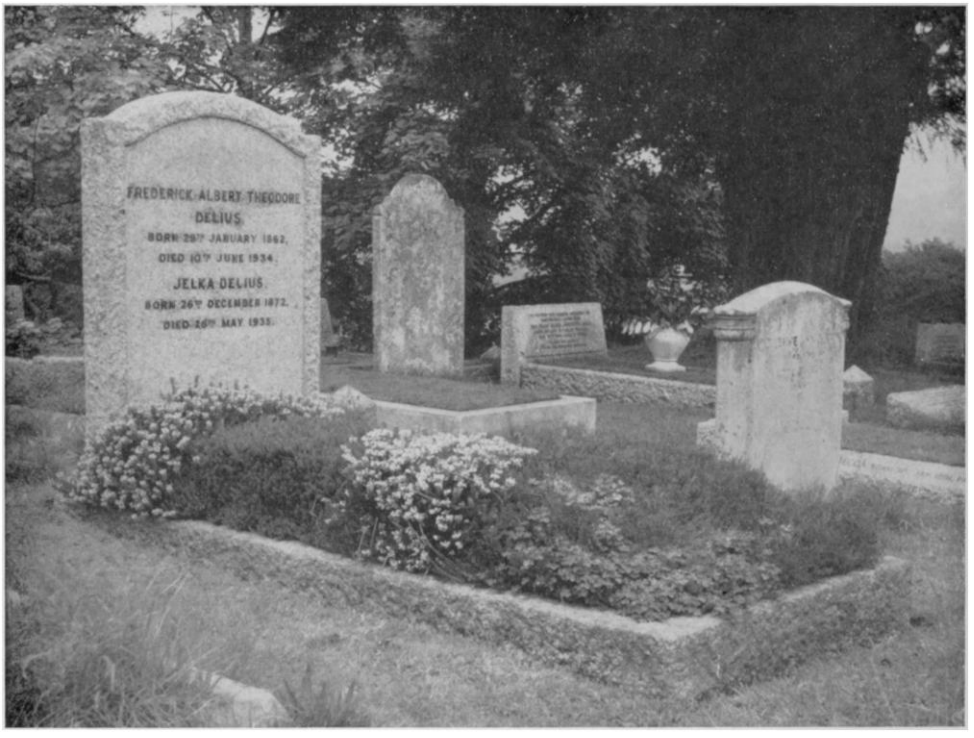


The powerful last testament of *Songs of Farewell* must finally give the lie to those who, with limited knowledge of a few of Delius's small nature pieces, smuggly over-emphasize his limitations. Rather should they marvel that the same style could have produced such different works as *Songs of Farewell* and *Songs of Sunset*, or *In a Summer Garden* and *North Country Sketches*; that within his limits, Delius achieved such variety.



Frederick Delius

Delius's birth-place at Bradford



The grave of Delius and his wife at Limpsfield, Surrey

Percy Grainger and his wife
at Grez

Delius with his German nurse
at Grez

Delius's house at Grez-sur-Loing