

Department of Music
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A QUEST FOR INNOCENCE



The Music of Frederick Delius - 1835-1900

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Concentrated into these opening bars are most of the idiomatic elements of Negro music which attracted Delius:

- a. quasi-pentatonic melody; with the exception of
- b. a flattened third, a stylization of the Negroes' 'blue' note (see also ex.7, bar 5);
- c. the melodic progression dom. - submed. - tonic;
- d. 'Scotch snap';
- e. rhythmic ostinati - in this instance Delius seems to have imitated the strumming sound of a plucked banjo or guitar; and
- f. alternating rhythms,  becoming  ;
in his extension of the theme Delius revels in playful syncopations:

Ex.7. 4 bars after fig.4 (strings only),



The image shows a musical score for five string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score consists of five staves. The music is in a common time signature and features a complex, syncopated rhythmic pattern. The Violin I and II parts play a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, while the Viola, Cello, and Double Bass parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and quarter notes. The overall texture is dense and rhythmic, characteristic of Delius's style.

In common with the earlier dance, this 'Danza' is carried by its rhythmic impulse to a powerful climax. From the second stage of the build-up ('Più animato', fig.5) the rhythmic cells of the first movement are also called into play.

The process of assimilating these characteristics of Negro folk music into his language had already reached an important stage in 1888, a year after Florida, when Delius wrote his Rhapsodische Variationen.³⁹ His first essay in a form in which he would later write several of his finest works is rather half-hearted. Composed in September 1888

39. Unpublished. DT vol.3 (RL p.25).

during a holiday in St.Malo,these variations have in several ways the appearance of an exercise or first draft: the theme is declared immediately in octaves by horn and trumpet,and is not otherwise harmonized or accompanied; all six complete variations remain anchored to the key of E major; there are frequent signs of unchecked work; the longest variation has 46 bars,and the shortest only 16; the work is incomplete, sketches for the 7th variation evaporating after 6 bars. Within these severely restricted parameters of length and tonality,the last thing these variations were likely to be was rhapsodic. It is probable that Delius applies the title in the sense that he uses the theme with considerable licence,in some variations employing it more 'in spirit than in letter'.

The Rhapsodische Variationen are of interest because they show a deliberate attempt by Delius to import a Floridian flavour into an otherwise conventional formal model and abstract context. He chooses to write his variations on a theme into which he has injected elements of the Negro folk idiom:

Ex.8. Rhapsodische Variationen,theme.



The quasi-pentatonic pattern of the melody,and especially the opening progression,are features familiar from Florida.

The degree to which the pentatonic shadings of the melody are allowed to dominate the tiny movements differs from variation to variation.The free manner in which Delius treats his theme is not unconnected with the fact that the melody is - for all its pentatonism - undistinguished and unyielding. However,at those moments when the theme is graced with a lively rhythmic impulsion,the smiling idiom of Florida charms briefly again. In this respect,the shortest movement,variation 3,is the most notable. The theme of this playful dance is in octaves in the four upper strings,while the trombones carry the harmony. And over the music Delius writes the extraordinary,if appropriate,instruction - 'Alla Negra':



The notion of a 'rhapsody' composition embodying impressions of his American experiences - in particular what he considered to be the many contrasts in the Negro character - was to stay with Delius for a decade and a half. In a foreword to the work which represents the culmination of his efforts in this direction, the Appalachia variations (1902-3), Delius writes:

"The composition describes the natural coloring of the distant tropical districts of the powerful Mississippi-River, which is so intimately connected with the fate of the negro-slaves. Longing melancholy, an intense love for nature, as well as the childlike humour and a native delight of dancing and singing are still to the present time the most characteristic qualities of this race."

The America/Negro rhapsody idea seems to have given rise in 1889 (the year after Rhapsodische Variationen) to La Quadroone (Rapsodie Floridienne). This work has unfortunately not survived.⁴⁰ In 1890 the variations experiment was tried out again - in Légendes for solo piano and orchestra.⁴¹ This work, like the Rhapsodische Variationen, exists only in an incomplete draft. One of the variations which is relatively fully worked out employs a pentatonic 'alla Negra' variant of the theme (see p. 123).

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40. For further information on this work, see RT p.128.

41. Unpublished. DT vol.39 (RL p.138-9).