

DELIUS, MUSIC AND MORALS

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Controversy has raged over this composer. Was he a British composer or a German composer?

Both his parents were German and so does that not make Delius a German? That he was born in Bradford in Yorkshire where his father owned a woollen mill does not make Delius British, does it?

To this day the area in Bradford where Delius lived is known as Little Germany.

His father was Julius (1822-1901). His mother was born Elise Pauline Kronig (1838- 1929). Fritz was the second of four boys and there were ten daughters.



The second controversy concerned the debate between him and Elgar as to who was the greater composer of the two? Sir Thomas Beecham rarely performed Elgar as he did not like his music, neither did Boult, but Beecham was a champion of Delius whom he regarded highly.

In the last years of their respective lives, Elgar visited Delius in France and they seemed to hit it off immediately and corresponded briefly. Elgar died in February 1934 and Delius in June of the same year. Elgar was as hailed as the greatest British composer since Purcell and, on Delius's death, the same accolade was given to him as it also was given to Holst.

Delius suffered from syphilis for many years, since his sojourn in Paris, and was eventually paralysed and in a wheelchair. He was also blind as a consequence of his syphilis.

This disease was self-inflicted. Like Schubert, he visited brothels and contracted this disease. Even when he knew he had the disease, he still regularly visited prostitutes.

He was not the sort of man that many liked. He was hatefully vicious about Christianity and other religions. He absorbed the pagan writings of Nietzsche who advocated that God was dead and Nietzsche also lead campaigns against morality and decency. He went mad and died insane.

Delius only wrote one religious work a setting for accompanied choir of Ave Maria set in German which is a beautiful setting.

Delius was born Fritz Theodore Albert on 29 January 1862 and only took the name Frederick on the death of his father in 1901. He died aged 80. His father was strict with his wayward son and Fritz objected to going into the wool industry and instead went to Florida in 1884 to administer his father's orange grove. His father never heard any of his son's music.

In Florida, Delius was impressed with the singing of those who had been black slaves and indications of this influence appear in his Florida Suite. It is said that he had a black mistress in Florida and fathered a child with her.

He studied music in Germany from 1886 and, in Leipzig, met Grieg who became his mentor and Delius later visited Grieg in Norway where he was impressed by the scenery which inspired his Song of the High Hills which contains some luscious music. Delius was also fortunate to study with Hans Sitt.

Most people who know Delius's music say that it is almost always sensual and erotic and that it depicts sex.

He moved to Paris in 1888 where he took an interest in art and literature more than in music. He purchased Paul Gauguin's *Nevermore*, a painting of a nude. He was obsessed with both sex and women and could not get enough of it.

He was a dirty old man. When male friends visited him, he would take them to brothels.

He composed *Paris the Song of a Great City* which portrays in music the seedy and decadent aspects of Paris with its artists and girlie shows.

It is accepted that Delius's early music is probably his best for here is where his orchestration is strong which strength does not appear in some of his later works. The *Symphonic Poem: Life's Dance* of 1889 is a good piece. The *Mass of Life* of 1905 has some very fine moments including the explosive beginning, but this is one of two major works that Delius wrote to attack the Christian Faith. These works are not liturgical and therefore the words *Mass* and *Requiem* are improperly used. The *Mass* is inspired by Nietzsche. The *Requiem* of 1914 is not a requiem at all. It does not open with a *Kyrie* or follow the traditional movements of a requiem. It begins with the words, " Our days here are one day for our days are rounded by sleep..."

His interest in nature, which he described as the product of evolution, is shown in his pastoral works such as *In a Summer Garden* of 1908, the *Songs of the High Hills* of 1911 and the glorious unaccompanied choral work *To be Sung on a Summer Night on the River* for SATTB. There is the *Song before Sunrise*, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* and the *Songs of Sunset* published in 1911 which are erotic love songs with a soprano and tenor as soloists.

Even committed Delians will admit that some of Delius's music has no direction. It goes nowhere. It merely deals with the note and harmony before proceeding to the next note and harmony. The *Piano Concerto* of 1897 is static and a non-event. The *Violin Concerto* published in 1921 is the same and the *Double Concerto* for violin, cello and orchestra fares no better. Understandably many find these works to be tedious. Delians call these works collections of isolated moments of sound and sumptuous harmonies. His three violin sonatas have struggled to become popular.

And this dealing with one note at a time in its harmonic cloak is regarded as acceptable and yet when Stockhausen did the same thing he was rubbished. One should not tolerate hypocrisy in music!

One has to admit that Delius's harmonies are original and, indeed, sometimes sumptuous and that his music is original which makes him a far greater composer than Elgar who, although he was English, wrote music in a dull Teutonic fashion. Delius's music went through changing fashions from the influences of America, Paris, Norway and perhaps England.

His operas, *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, *Koanga* and *Irmelin* contain some lovely moments but tedious moments as well.

In London at the turn of the century, he almost bankrupted himself when he put on a concert of his own music. It was the first time he had heard any of his music. It was not a success. In fact, one soloist covered their ears at certain times in the concert.

Another friend of Delius was the Australian Percy Grainger who encouraged him to use traditional tunes in a few of his pieces. Delius's incidental music to *Hassan* is very popular.

Delius married Jelka Rosen and lived with her in a quiet house at *Graz-sur-Loing* near Fontainebleau.

Because had syphilis he apparently did not consummate the marriage but often visited Paris for sex with prostitutes. One wonders how many of them he infected if they were not already infected.

Delius would say of marriage, "Always marry someone who loves you for your art!"

When finances were at a low on one occasion he had to sell his Gauguin painting of the naked Tahitian woman... but, generally, Jelka, who was a painter and had some money, was able to keep, support and care for Delius.

The loss of the use of his limbs and his blindness led to an organist from Yorkshire to be his amanuensis. His name was Eric Fenby and I am sure he had to mind his p's and q's with Delius who was now even more difficult.

Delius died at Graz-sur-Loing on 10 June 1934 and was buried in France. He had apparently expressed the wish to be buried in England and, surprisingly, in the south of England. In May 1935, his remains were taken to Limpsfield in Surrey where he was buried at midnight.

There are many British composers who lived immoral and decadent, indeed filthy lives, as well as Delius. There is bisexual Elgar who lifted the dresses of women in the choir and orchestra and Britten who was a disgusting pederast and abuser of boys. Do we excuse them and overlook their civil and criminal offences in favour of their music?

As far as I am concerned, one cannot call Britten great because he raped boys! 'Great' means of exceptional talent and achievement, skilful, excellent, a leader in a particular field, extremely good in the sense of more than usual. At best, we could say that he was a great composer, if that is the case, but he was a despicable and nasty human being who was a criminal.

I have said this before but I say it here because it is relevant in the context of the life of Delius. It is also referred to here because some readers will not have read my previous comments on these composers and every essay is a separate article.

How do we assess Delius as a composer and as a man? Most people will avoid the question and squirm away from it!

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