Frederick Delius was born in Bradford in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the north of England. His parents were German: Julius and Elise Pauline Delius had moved from Bielefeld, Germany, to Britain to set themselves up in the wool business. Frederick (‘Fritz’ to his family, ‘Fred’ to his friends) Delius was the fourth of their fourteen children.

He was educated at Bradford Grammar School (where the singer John Coates was his contemporary). Delius felt little attraction to the country of his birth and spent most of his life abroad, in the United States and on the continent of Europe, chiefly in France. Nonetheless his music has been described by Felix Aprahamian as ‘extremely redolent of the soil of this country [Britain] and characteristic of the finer elements of the national spirit’.[1]

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In America

Julius Delius eventually sent Frederick (apparently at Frederick’s request) to be the manager of a grapefruit plantation at Solano Grove on the St Johns River in Florida, USA. There, west of St Augustine and south of Jacksonville, Delius continued to be engrossed in music and in Jacksonville met Thomas Ward, who became his teacher in counterpoint and composition. Delius was fascinated by the African-American music he heard in the Florida back country, and his compositions in America were influenced by African-American spirituals and folk music. As late as the mid-1960s some African-American residents of St. John’s county remembered him.[2][3]

While in Florida, Delius had his first composition published, and later put his memories into the Florida Suite, written at Leipzig in 1887. The house he lived in from 1884 to 1885 in Solano Grove was given to John Coates, who became his contemporary. Delius felt little attraction to the country of his birth and spent most of his life abroad, in the United States and on the continent of Europe, chiefly in France. Nonetheless his music has been described by Felix Aprahamian as ‘extremely redolent of the soil of this country [Britain] and characteristic of the finer elements of the national spirit’.[1]

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to become increasingly paralysed, eventually needing use of a wheelchair. He therefore employed Eric Fenby, who originally wrote Delius a fan letter, as his amanuensis and the great works of Delius’s final years were dictated to Fenby, who later wrote a book about the experience of working with Delius. Fenby also co-wrote the screen adaptation from the book for a 1968 film, Song of Summer, directed by Ken Russell, starring Max Adrian as the blind composer and Christopher Gable as Fenby.

Delius was profoundly engaged in the contemplation of nature and disliked religion, though Koanga displays an interest in voodooism. He admired the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, and his choice of Nietzsche texts for A Mass of Life, the determinism evident in Immelin and the Village Romeo and Juliet, and the living metempsychosis of the boy and the seagull in Sea Drift have prompted some to see in his work a form of pantheism.

Death and burial

Delius died at Grez in 1934 and was buried in a nearby cemetery on the Marlott road that leads out of Grez. The interment ceremony was unusual: there was no priest present, and there were no prayers or music. In 1935, in completion of his own declared wish to be buried in ‘a quiet country churchyard in a south of England village’, his remains were exhumed and taken from France to the United Kingdom. Jelka contracted pneumonia during the Channel crossing, and could not attend the funeral. On 24 May an Anglican interment took place at the Church of Saint Peter in Limpetsfield, Surrey. Vast crowds converged, and a section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, together with the cellist Beatrice Harrison (of Oxted, nearby), who had given early performances of his works, performed after the funeral ceremony, and Sir Thomas Beecham gave the address. After Jelka died, four days later, she was interred in the same grave as her husband. Beecham’s grave is situated approximately ten metres from theirs.

Music

Delius’s musical idiom is unusually consistent; almost everything he wrote can be recognized as distinctively his. The idiom is characterized by a curious mixture of pentatonic figures and chromaticism, although still largely tonal; it reflects a move from the textbook post-romanticism of the years following the death (1883) of Wagner (a composer whom Delius greatly revered), to a style that was unique. It blended Impressionism with continuing hints of Wagner, and with northern European and African-American folk idioms. His use of luminous harmonies, mainly slow-moving, and constantly evolving melody, with the frequent use of leitmotifs, is what prompted Sir Thomas Beecham to describe him as “the last great apostle of romantic beauty in music.” The harmony and melody in his style were influenced greatly by African-American music of the time, using blues chords and melodic characteristics that would become crucial parts of popular music years later.

Not everyone likes his work: Bernard Levin famously called it “the musical equivalent of blanchemange”. It is an acquired taste - and not everyone acquires it.

His best-known pieces include the brief orchestral piece On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring: Brigg Fair (“An English Rhapsody”); In A Summer Garden; North Country Sketches; A Mass of Life to Friedrich Nietzsche’s Also sprach Zarathustra; Florida Suite; Sea Drift, a setting of text by Walt Whitman, for baritone, chorus and orchestra; A Late Lark, setting of text by William Ernest Henley; Songs of Farewell, another setting of Whitman texts, for chorus and orchestra; Cynara and Songs of Sunset, both settings of texts by Ernest Dowson; Koanga, which as an opera with a black principal character antedates George Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess by four decades and is roughly contemporary with Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha, an atheist Requiem; four concertos: a violin concerto, a cello concerto, a double concerto for violin and cello, and a piano concerto (also somewhat Gershinesque; premiered by Julius Buths in 1904); the colourful, picturesque tone poem Paris: Song of a Great City; and the beautifully exuberant symphonic composition Life’s Dance. Orchestral excerpts from his operas, for example, La Calinda from Koanga — which originated in the Florida Suite — and The Walk to the Paradise Garden from A Village Romeo and Juliet, are also played and recorded reasonably often. There are a number of chamber works (three mature violin sonatas, a cello sonata and a string quartet).

Recording projects

The difficulties that Delius experienced in obtaining adequate public performance of his works caused him (and those who admired his music) to recognise the necessity of making available good quality gramophone records, by which it should become more widely known. As in live performance, Thomas Beecham was the pioneer of this movement, although Geoffrey Toye (with the London Symphony Orchestra) conducted a notable group of orchestral recordings for HMV around 1930 including Brigg Fair, In a Summer Garden (A Song before Sunrise conducted by John Barbirolli on the fourth side), On Hearing the First Cuckoo, and Summer Night on the River, which were admired by the composer, among others. There are no very early recordings of the concerti, but by 1936 the violin Sonata No. 1 was recorded by May Harrison with Arnold Bax (HMV), and No. 2 by Albert Sammons with Evlyn Howard-Jones (Columbia); the second is also in the viola arrangement by Lionel Tertis with George Reeves, in a set that also contains the “Entr’acte” and “Serenade” from the incidental music to James Elroy Flecker’s The Bird of Paradise, and the beautifully exuberant symphonic composition Life’s Dance. Orchestral excerpts from his operas, for example, La Calinda from Koanga — which originated in the Florida Suite — and The Walk to the Paradise Garden from A Village Romeo and Juliet, are also played and recorded reasonably often. There are a number of chamber works (three mature violin sonatas, a cello sonata and a string quartet).

The first Sea Drift to be issued (though soon deleted) was Decca’s in 1929 with Roy Henderson, conducted by Julian Clifford. Decca was founded in 1929, and this was one of its earliest releases, a succès d’estime for the company’s founder, Sir Edward Lewis. Thomas Beecham had made the first recording of the work a year earlier, with baritone Dennis Noble, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Manchester Beecham Opera Chorus (Columbia), but poor acoustics caused it to remain unpublished. Beecham began his Delius recordings with the old Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, for Columbia, with the Walk to the Paradise Garden and the First Cuckoo, in December 1927, and Summer Night on the River (July 1928), but had two failed attempts at Brigg Fair in July and November 1928 before finally achieving his intentions in a December session. In 1929 he accompanied at the piano a series of Delius song recordings with Dora Labbette, only some of which were issued.
Delius Society recordings

In April 1934 Beecham recorded *Paris: The Song of a Great City* (with the London Philharmonic Orchestra), and as Fenby sat with the dying Delius they waited in vain for the test pressings to be released by the French Customs. Delius told Fenby he wanted Beecham to record all his best music. Soon after Delius's death, Beecham persuaded Jelka (who knew that she was in failing health) that a *Delius Trust* should be created to make possible a model edition of his works and to provide for them to be recorded. For the latter purpose a Delius Society was formed, initially as a private organization, and at the request of Beecham and the Society Committee it was taken over in 1934 by Columbia Records for the issue of records outside the normal monthly listings, which could be obtained by members of the public who paid a subscription to the Society.

Three Delius Society volumes were issued before the war, all conducted by Beecham: [11]

- **Volume 1** (recorded 1934, issued 1934/5): *Paris: Koanga, closing scene; Eventyr; Hassan, Interlude and Serenade; songs 'To the Queen of my Heart' and 'Love's Philosophy' (with Heddle Nash)*.
- **Volume 2** (recorded 1936): *Sea Drift (with John Brownlee), Over the Hills and Far Away; In a Summer Garden; Intermezzo from Fennimore and Gerda*.
- **Volume 3** (recorded 1938): *Appalachia; Hassan, La Calinda, and closing scene (with Jan van der Gucht); the prelude from Irmelin*. Several other titles recorded in 1938 remained unpublished.

After the war Beecham resumed the project, but now under the HMV label. [12] Four titles, including the Piano Concerto with Betty Humby Beecham, made in October 1945 remained unpublished, but a year later the concerto was successfully re-recorded, a fine version of the Violin Concerto with Jean Pougnet was made, and also *First Cuckoo, Song of the High Hills, Brigg Fair, Marche Caprice and the Irmelin prelude*. (In 1944 a recording of the violin concerto had been made by Albert Sammons with Malcolm Sargent for Columbia Records, a performance said to have 'the dumbfounding splendour of a sunset'.) [13]

The Songs of Sunset with Nancy Evans and Redvers Llewellyn were recorded but not issued. However, May and July 1948 saw a complete *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (12 discs). After a failed *Sea Drift* with Gordon Clinton in January 1951, there was a successful one with Bruce Boyce in April 1954. In January and April 1953, the celebrated recording of *A Mass of Life* (with Rosina Raisbeck, Monica Sinclair, Charles Craig and Bruce Boyce) was made. [14] A substantial recording of incidental music for Flecker's *Hassan* was made by Beecham for CBS Columbia in October 1955, and other Delius Trust recordings continued to appear on that label.

Beecham cut many other records of shorter works between 1946 and 2 April 1957, including some stereophonic recordings for EMI; meanwhile Sir Anthony Collins was recording some of these for Decca. [15] A powerful account of the violin concerto by Robert Gerle (conducted by Robert Zeller) was recorded by Westminster and issued by World Record Club (CM 59) about 1960; the work was again chosen, together with the Double Concerto, conducted by Meredith Davies and performed by Yehudi Menuhin with Paul Tortelier, for an EMI Quadrophonic release in 1977 (ASD 3343), produced in consultation with Eric Fenby. At about the same time the World Record Club (having become a branch of EMI) reissued the early Beecham Delius recordings in two box set volumes on its 'Retrospect' label, also under Fenby's supervision.

List of works

**Operas**

- *Irmelin* (1890–92; premiere 1953)
- *Koanga* (after George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes*; 1895–97; UA 1904)
- *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (after Gottfried Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dörfe*; 1900–01; premiere in Berlin 1907, London 1910)
- *Margot la rouge* (1902; premiere 1983 by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis)
- *Fennimore and Gerda* (1909–10; premiere 1919)

**Incidental music**

- *Zanoni* (1888)
- *Folkeradet* (1897)
- *Hassan* (1920–23)

**Concertante**

- *Suita for Violin and Orchestra* (1888)
- *Légende for Violin and Orchestra* (1895)
- *Piano Concerto in C minor* (1897)
- *Double Concerto for Violin, Cello and Orchestra* (1915–16)
- *Violin Concerto* (1916)
- *Cello Concerto* (1921)
- *Caprice and Elegy for Cello and Orchestra* (1930)

**Orchestral works**

- *Florida Suite* (1887)
- *Three Pieces* (Schlittenfahrt and March caprice, 1887–88)
- *Hiawatha* — tone poem (1888)
- *Idylle de Printemps* (1889)
- *Little Suite* (1889–90)
- *Three Small Tonepoems* (*Summer Evening, Winter Night, Spring Morning*, 1890)
- *Paa Vidderne* (*Sur les cimes*) — Symphonic Poem after *Ibsen* (1890–92; version with speaker 1888)
- *Over the Hills and Far Away* — Fantasy Overture (1895–97)
- *Appalachia for Orchestra and Chorus* (1896)
- *La Ronde Se Déroule* — Symphonic Poem (1899)
- *Paris: The Song of a Great City* (1899)
Brigg Fair: An English Rhapsody (1907)
In a Summer Garden — Rhapsody (1908)
Dance Rhapsody No. 1 (1908)
Life’s Dance (1908?)
Two Pieces for Small Orchestra (On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring, 1912; Summer Night on the River, 1911)
North Country Sketches (1913–14)
Air and Dance for Strings (1915)
Dance Rhapsody No. 2 (1916)
Eventyr (Once Upon a Time) (1917)
A Song Before Sunrise for Small Orchestra (1918)
A Song of Summer (1929–30)
Irmelin Prelude (1931)
Fantastic Dance (1931)

Vocal works

Six German Partsongs for Choir (1887)
Sakuntala for Tenor and Orchestra (1889)
Maud for Tenor and Orchestra (1891)
Mitternachtslied for Baritone, Male Choir und Orchestra (1898)
Appalachia for Choir und Orchestra (1898–1903)
Sea Drift for Baritone, Choir and Orchestra (1903–04)
A Mass of Life for Soloists, Choir and Orchestra (1904–05)
Songs of Sunset for Mezzo-soprano, Baritone, Choir and Orchestra (1906–07)
Cynara for Baritone und Orchestra (1907; completed 1929)
On Craig Dhu for Choir (1907)
Midsummer Song for Choir (1908)
Wanderer’s Song for Male Choir (1908)
An Arabesk for Baritone, Choir and Orchestra (1911)
A Song of the High Hills for Choir and Orchestra (1911)
Two Songs for a Children’s Album (1913)
Requiem for Soprano, Baritone, Choir and Orchestra (1914–16)
Two Songs to be sung of a Summer Night on the Water for Choir (1917)
The splendour falls on castle walls for Choir (1923)
A Late Lark for Voice and Orchestra (1925)
Songs of Farewell for Choir and Orchestra (1930)
Idyll: Once I passed through a populous city for Soprano, Baritone and Orchestra (1930–32)

Chamber music

String Quartet (1888)
Romance for Violin and Piano (1889)
Violin Sonata B-major (1892)
String Quartet (1893)
Romance for Cello and Piano (1896)
Violin Sonata No. 1 (1905–14)
String Quartet (1916)
Cello Sonata (1916)
Violin Sonata No. 2 (1923)
Violin Sonata No. 3 (1930)

Piano and harpsichord music

Pensées Mélodieuses (no. 2, 1885)
Two Pieces for Piano (1889–90)
Dance for Cembalo (1919)
Five Pieces for Piano (1922–23)
Three Preludes for Piano (1923)
Zum Carnival
Badinage
Presto leggiero

Songs

Five Songs from the Norwegian (1888)
Seven Songs from the Norwegian (1889–90; 2 orchestral songs)
Three English Songs (1891)
Two Songs after Verlaine (1895; with orchestra)
Seven Danish Songs (1897; with orchestra)
Four Songs after Nietzsche (1898)
Im Glück wir lachend gingen (1898)
The Violet (1900; with orchestra)
Autumn (1900)
Black Roses (1901)
Summer Landscape (1902; with orchestra)
The nightingale has a lyre of gold (1910)
La lune blanche (1911; with orchestra)
Chanson d’automne (1911)
I-Brasil (1913)
Four Old English Lyrics (1915–16)
- Avant que tu ne t'en ailles (1919)
- 18 unpublished songs

Literature

(in chronological order)

- Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock), Frederick Delius (Bodley Head, London 1923). A revised edition, a reprint of the original "with additions, annotations, and comments by Hubert Foss" was published by Bodley Head in 1952 (in USA by Greenwood Press, 1974; ISBN 978-0837172997)
- Arthur Hutchings, Delius (Macmillan, London 1949)

As an inspiration for other artists

- The song "Delius (Song of Summer)" by Kate Bush (from her 1980 album Never For Ever). A specially-recorded video for the song was played for a bemused Fenby on the Russell Harby Show on 25 November 1980.
- The characters Robert Frobisher and Vyvyan Ayrs in the 2004 novel The Song of Summer, produced for the BBC's Omnibus series, dramatizes Fenby's working relationship with Delius.

Movie soundtracks

- Crush features the Florida Suite

References

4. Fenby, 1936, Delius as I Knew Him.
5. Fenby 1936, 221.
7. Tertis had performed his arrangement (with Fenby) of the 3rd Violin Sonata for Delius at Grez (see Fenby 1936, 122).
14. n.b. The soprano role in this recording includes some takes recorded by Sylvia Fisher, who was replaced by Rosina Raisbeck for the remainder.

External links

- Synopsis of Delius's life and musical style by musicologist J. Marshall Bevil, with specific comments on Florida Suite, Koongas, and "A Late Lark"
- Official site of The Delius Trust and The Delius Society
- Photo of Delius' grave
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Frederick Albert Theodore Delius CH (29 January 1862 – 10 June 1934) was an English composer born in Bradford in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the north of England. Life: Delius’s parents were German. Frederick Delius. Life. Early years. Delius's first successes came in Germany, where Hans Haym and other conductors promoted his music from the late 1890s. In Delius’s native Britain, it was 1907 before his music made regular appearances in concert programmes, after Thomas Beecham took it up.