

## Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912): *Hiawatha Overture* (1899)

While his compositions are less well known today, during his short lifetime Coleridge-Taylor was recognized as one of Great Britain's foremost composers. He wrote over 100 compositions, including symphonic, choral, vocal, and chamber works, many of which were performed internationally to great acclaim. These accomplishments are all the more extraordinary given his biography. The remarkable events begin with his improbable birth, which resulted from an interracial affair in Victorian England. His father, a doctor from Sierra Leone, had attempted to establish a medical practice in London, but found the racism he experienced in the profession too much to bear. He returned to Sierra Leone not knowing that Coleridge-Taylor's mother, Alice, a white Englishwoman, was pregnant with his child. Alice, a lover of literature, named her son after the famous British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the founding figures of Romanticism. Within his family were number of musicians, and, recognizing the young boy's musical aptitude, encouraged his education. At age 17, he was advanced enough that he was accepted with sponsorship to the Royal College of Music studying violin and composition. Among his schoolmates was the young British composer Edgar Elgar, who served as an important professional connection later in his career.

At age 23, Coleridge-Taylor composed his most famous work, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, a cantata based upon American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*. The cantata premiered at the Royal Conservatory of Music. After hearing the work, Sir Arthur Sullivan—of Gilbert and Sullivan fame—wrote in his diary: "Much impressed by the lad's genius. The music is fresh and original—he has melody and harmony in abundance, and his scoring is brilliant and full of colour—at time luscious, rich and sensual." The spectacular success of the cantata became a global phenomenon, with performances throughout Europe, in New Zealand, and even China. In Britain, it was performed annually for decades in Royal Albert Hall, with costumes and fully staged. In the US, the work inspired a group of Black Americans to form the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society in Washington, D.C. The group invited Coleridge-Taylor to travel to the US to conduct the choir accompanied by the United States Marine Band. He also accepted an invitation to meet President Theodore Roosevelt. Through this visit and subsequent trips to America, Coleridge-Taylor met prominent Black thinkers, artists, writers, and politicians, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Fredrick Douglass, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. After hearing performances of Black spirituals, he was inspired to compose a collection entitled "25 Negro Melodies." With a preface by Booker T. Washington, Coleridge-Taylor wrote in the introduction that "What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk-music, Dvořák for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for Negro melodies."

*Hiawatha Overture* was, of course, also inspired by Longfellow's epic poem. The subject of the work is a fictional Ojibwe leader, Hiawatha, who falls tragically in love with a Dakota woman, Minnehaha. While Longfellow took inspiration from published collections of Indian stories, the poem isn't the least bit authentic to Indian traditions or related to the historical Hiawatha, a leader of the Iroquois Confederacy. It is also infused with the "noble savage" stereotypes that permeate most Romantic literature featuring Native American subjects. Interestingly, however,

the poem resonated with some African-American Christians, for whom Longfellow's narrative, centered upon a soon-to-be-displaced people proselytized by their oppressors, held particular meaning. In the poem, Hiawatha speaks to his people about the White missionaries, saying "Listen to the truth they tell you/For the Master of Life has sent them/From the land of light and morning!" Coleridge-Taylor chose to make the perceived connection between African Americans and Native Americans explicit in his music. One of its themes is based on the Black spiritual, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've seen." It also seems clear that Coleridge-Taylor felt a personal connection with the character of Hiawatha. In the beginning of the poem, Hiawatha searches for his father, who has left his mother to care for him alone, mirroring Coleridge-Taylor's own biography. The love story, too, reverberated. The day he was married, Coleridge-Taylor sent a telegram to his bride with a quote from the poem: "You shall enter in my wigwam for the heart's right hand I gave you." He signed it "Hiawatha," the name the couple later gave their first son.

As an Englishman, Coleridge-Taylor had little frame of reference for African-American music beyond a few published songs and even less familiarity with Native American music. He hadn't yet visited the United States. The music we hear, consequently, with harps and sparkling orchestration, doesn't convey the sound of American-ness that much later works by William Grant Still or Copland might convey. It's more Dvořák than Gershwin, but an exciting tone portrait nonetheless.