

86. Forest Scene

Fantasy on Op. 66, No. 4

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
(1875-1912)
arr. William Melton

Coleridge-Taylor, Samuel

(born 15 August 1875 in Holborn, London; died 1 September 1912 in Croydon, Surrey)

His father had come from Sierra Leone to London to study medicine and qualified as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. But when racial prejudice dimmed his professional prospects he left his family to return to west Africa (and was subsequently appointed coroner in Gambia). Samuel, named for the famous poet, began playing violin at the age of five, excelled in a Croydon Presbyterian church choir and was admitted to the Royal College of Music despite worries about the objections of other students to his colour. There he studied composition with Charles Villiers Stanford, who wrote Joseph Joachim of his pupil: 'his power of melodic invention reminds me a good deal of Dvorák. He is altogether the most remarkable thing in the younger generation that I have seen: and he *knows his counterpoint*'.

Coleridge-Taylor founded an amateur orchestra in Croydon, and attempted to support himself with a hodgepodge of teaching jobs. An important influence was the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, who became both friend and collaborator. After the success of an early orchestral work at the Gloucester Festival and praise from Edward Elgar, Coleridge-Taylor produced the trilogy of Longfellow settings that made his reputation: *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898), *The Death of Minnehaha* (1899) and *Hiawatha's Departure* (1900). He was suddenly one of the best known English composers of his generation, but as composition did not pay the bills of a growing family (two children, Hiawatha and Gwendolyn), he took up a professorship in composition at London's Trinity College of Music and juggled a slew of conducting posts in and around London.

Despite these time-consuming duties his catalogue of works grew at a

hectic rate: the three-act opera *Thelma* and the one-act *Endymion's Dream*, a Symphony in A minor, a Violin Concerto in G minor, myriad orchestral and choral works (many based on African themes), chamber works, choral pieces, songs and piano works. These often displayed skilful incorporation of African folk influences as well as an awareness of European nationalists like Dvořák and Grieg. Coleridge-Taylor made three concert tours to the United States (1904, 1906, 1910), where he was feted by musical luminaries Horatio Parker and George W. Chadwick, met Booker T. Washington and was received at the White House by Theodore Roosevelt. He also invested his energies into politics, supporting Pan-Africanism in particular. The furious creative pace came to an abrupt end when Coleridge-Taylor died of pneumonia at the age of thirty-seven. Though several biographies have appeared in the interim, few of his compositions are currently in print.

Forest Scenes, Characteristic Pieces for Pianoforte, Op. 66 (London: Augener Ltd., 1907, plate no. 13552) consists of five movements that chronicle the journey of the 'Forest Maiden' from lonely woods to 'The Great City'. Her companion, called simply 'The Phantom', provides a horse and the means for her escape. The fourth piece in the series depicts their ride *vivace* in 6/8 metre, while the contrasting *cantabile* section mirrors the Maiden's growing regard for her deliverer.

Text by William Melton