

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR and DVORAK VIOLIN CONCERTOS

In the course of his too-short life, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor rose to an iconic status well ahead of his time. Received at the White House by President Roosevelt, with an American choral society named after him and his cantata *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (later a trilogy of Scenes from *Hiawatha* based on Henry W. Longfellow's epic poem) known throughout the choral-singing world, his musical achievements were virtually unprecedented among people of African origin in Europe and America.



Coleridge-Taylor was in fact of mixed race: his mother was English and his father was a doctor from Sierra Leone. His musical talents were likewise eclectic. Having entered the Royal College of Music in 1890 as a violinist, he emerged seven years later as a composer and conductor. His composition teacher, Charles Stanford, once told another pupil who had made a racially disparaging remark about Coleridge-Taylor that the black student 'had more talent in his little finger' than the rest of the class had in their whole bodies.

He went on to become the conductor of the Handel Society and a professor of composition at Trinity College of Music and the Guildhall School of Music. But he was also a keen participant in black activism: much influenced by the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, with whom he collaborated on several sets of songs and an opera, *Dream Lovers* (1898), he regarded it as a personal mission to help achieve equality for his race. In 1900 he was one of the organisers of the first international Pan-Africanist conference in London and he collaborated in founding a London-based newspaper, the *African and Orient Review*. Meanwhile, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898) achieved a popularity in Britain that could only be compared to Handel's *Messiah*.

Visiting the USA in 1906, Coleridge-Taylor met the musical philanthropists Carl and Ellen Stoeckel who from that year onwards held an annual Norfolk Music Festival in their 'Music Shed' (seating more than 1600 people) in the foothills of the Berkshire mountains. They invited him to conduct *Hiawatha* at the festival in 1910, where he was much f?d by an enthusiastic audience. The occasion gave him the chance to become reacquainted with the great violinist Maud Powell, who had already performed several of his short works for violin and piano.



In discussion with Powell and the Stoeckels, Coleridge-Taylor developed the idea of writing a violin concerto based on negro spiritual themes. After he had completed the work, however, neither he nor Powell was content with it. The composer asked the violinist to send it back, saying that he was instead 'writing a new work at white heat'; Carl Stoeckel also received word from Coleridge-Taylor 'requesting me to and original work, all the melodies being his own, and that it was a hundred times better than the first composition'.

On receiving the replacement concerto, Powell declared that it was 'like a bouquet of flowers' and dubbed the composer 'a coloured Dvorak'. She agreed to give the premiere on 4 June 1912 - though the event was almost scuppered when the

orchestral parts were shipped to the USA on the Titanic. Fortunately Coleridge-Taylor was able to produce a new set in time.

Less happily, he was unable to attend the premiere himself. Overworked and exhausted - his celebrity did not extend to financial security - he died of pneumonia



that September, aged only 38. On his sickbed, he apparently seemed to be conducting an imaginary performance of his Violin Concerto. Remembering his encounters with Coleridge-Taylor, the composer Havergal Brian wrote that he was 'in all truth the image of the hero in his masterpiece, Hiawatha. Our interest in his music ebbs and flows, which is well, for like the sea it will never grow stale.'

The concerto - which has only been performed a handful of times and never recorded before the present account - follows the traditional three-movement format. The solemn and lyrical character of the sonata-form first movement seems to recall

Dvorak at times, Grieg at others and, in the rich use of the brass section, Elgar, whom Coleridge-Taylor revered. Some of its melodic contours occasionally suggest the influence of negro spiritual themes. The exquisite slow movement, opening with muted strings, is imbued with a delicacy and wistfulness of exceptional inspiration; and the major-key finale, with its syncopated rhythms, resolves the work in a generally lighter and optimistic mood.

Dvorak's Violin Concerto predates Coleridge-Taylor's by 29 years. Its composer too was one day to be greatly inspired by the indigenous music of America. Recent research has revealed that Dvorak had himself considered writing an opera on Hiawatha and that although he abandoned the project, many of the themes he had developed for it found their way ultimately into his Ninth Symphony, 'From the New World'. The cor anglais melody of the second movement turned out to have been intended for the death of Minnehaha.

The spirit of Dvorak's native Bohemia, however, thoroughly infuses the rhythmic drive and lavish melodies of his Violin Concerto. It dates from summer 1879, when Dvorak was receiving his greatest international acclaim yet thanks to his Slavonic Dances. Through Brahms, a generous champion, he met the great violinist Joseph Joachim, who played an important role in the concerto's creative process, making extensive suggestions for revisions, most of which Dvorak adopted (though he refused to cut the beautiful linking passage between the first and second movements). Joachim in the end never performed the work; the premiere was instead given by Frantisek Ondricek, a Czech violinist and friend of Dvorak's, in 1883. It was none other than Maud Powell who performed the concerto for the first time in the USA.



Like Coleridge-Taylor's concerto, Dvorak's moves from opening darkness towards concluding light; this progression, plus the connection of the first movement to the second without a break, follows a format well established by the violin concertos of Mendelssohn and Bruch. But also this work seems in several respects to anticipate Dvorak's later cello concerto - notably in the haunting, declamatory opening themes, and the turbulent central episode in the otherwise intensely tender slow

movement. The final movement is based on a Czech folk-dance called the 'furiant', which Dvorak used frequently in the Slavonic Dances. Its characteristic lilting cross-rhythms, combined felicitously with Dvorak's favourite harmonic twists, permeate this irresistible finale.

- Jessica Duchon