

# Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Valse In A-Flat*

**T**he ethnicity of the Anglo-African Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) is relevant to his music, because the freshness and vitality of his best work seems to stem from his awareness of being different from his Edwardian peers. Even when he does not choose explicitly black subjects, he is drawn to non-white cultures for inspiration (from his early *Hiawatha* music to his late oratorio *A Tale of Old Japan*). Also, his being black provided a felicitous link with the New World, influencing both his own art and the musical culture of America.

His father, Daniel Taylor, a native of Sierra Leone in West Africa, having come to England to study medicine, married a 17-year-old English girl. They named their one child Samuel Coleridge, after the famous English poet, Samuel Taylor-Coleridge. (Coleridge-Taylor would one day make a lush choral rhapsody from his inverted namesake's "Kubla Khan," at the suggestion of the poet's grand-nephew.)

Almost certainly due to racial prejudice, Dr. Taylor was unable to establish a practice in England, and shortly returned to Africa. (The composer barely remembered him.) When Samuel was five, Mrs. Taylor's landlord and friend introduced him to music study, giving him a violin and beginning his instruction. Coleridge-Taylor's obvious talent, as well as his serious, winning personality, continued to attract the help of mentors and patrons, and his progress from choirboy and soloist in local churches to composition student of Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music is almost boring in the consistency of its success. The celebrated Edward Elgar, too busy to accept a commission, recommended it be given to Coleridge-Taylor, "far and away the cleverest fellow going amongst the young men," and the performance of his resulting orchestral *Ballade* at the Gloucester Festival of 1898 brought Coleridge-Taylor immediate recognition at age 22.

The same year, he completed his most famous work, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, using a section of Longfellow's once ubiquitous *The Song of Hiawatha*. The poem's *faux naïve* tone, relentlessly unvaried meter, and sheer length is hardly likely to appeal to the present-day reader. However, with his sincere enthusiasm for the poem's subject, Coleridge-Taylor magically distills its strengths, evoking an innocent, legendary world.

To a public dulled by the sanctimonious piety of the typical oratorio of the day, encountering the vibrant energy and pictorial vividness of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* must have been like shedding constricting formal clothing for a dip in a cool wooded stream. Particularly impressive is the tenor solo "Onaway, Awake"—this love song glows with an unabashed and joyous desire. Rumors from the rehearsals had alerted the musical

public to the work's novelty, and the premiere proved a sensation. From this moment, Coleridge-Taylor was a celebrity. (He would name his first-born "Hiawatha.") He followed up with two further Hiawathan oratorios—both impressive, but neither achieving the concentration of the *Wedding Feast*. (The trilogy long retained its popularity in England—staged performances were given in the Royal Albert Hall from 1924 until 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War.)

Hiawatha's success (and perhaps its non-white American subject) excited the interest of the African-American intelligentsia. In 1901, an all-black choral society named in honor of the composer was formed in Washington, DC, and in 1904 was able to bring Coleridge-Taylor over to conduct.

Not only was Coleridge-Taylor rapturously acclaimed by the public and the press, but he also enjoyed such official honors as a reception by President Theodore Roosevelt. He returned for concert tours in 1906 and 1910 and felt these sojourns—his first chance to meet a large black community—to be a sort of homecoming. He even considered moving to America.

The American experiences seem to have strengthened Coleridge-Taylor's sense of racial identity. He went on to produce such large works as the orchestral *Bamboula: Rhapsodic Dance* (based on the African melody used much earlier by Gottschalk), the *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* and his most ambitious work for piano solo, *24 Negro Melodies*, on both spirituals and African songs.

Very few composers have ever been able to support themselves by concert composition alone, and Coleridge-Taylor's time was constantly taken up by teaching, conducting amateur orchestras and choruses, and even adjudicating Welsh singing contests. (As a young, inexperienced composer, he had sold the rights to his *Hiawatha* trilogy to his publisher for a flat fee. Had he been able to secure royalties, he would have been financially secure.) His incidental music for several plays produced by the distinguished Herbert Beerbohm Tree brought Coleridge-Taylor satisfaction as well as remuneration. It seems certain that overwork weakened him, making him prey to pneumonia at the age of 37—he spent the very day before his death correcting the orchestral parts to his violin concerto.

Coleridge-Taylor's valse suite *Three-Fours* (1907) exemplifies his gift for producing fresh-sounding music within a very conservative musical language. The variety of phrase length and unexpected harmonic juxtapositions of the A-Flat Valse enliven the suite as a whole. Eight bars from the end, we find a rhythmic allusion to the beloved waltz in the same key by Brahms, one of Coleridge-Taylor's favorite composers.

# Valse In A-Flat

## Op. 71, No. 4

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor  
(1875-1912)

Andante ( $\text{♩} = 66.$ )

*pp*

*mp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp*

*poco rall.*

*pp*

*poco rall.*

*f* *p*

*a tempo (poco animato)*

The musical score consists of five systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The first system is marked *mf* and *a tempo (poco animato)*. The second system is marked *mf*. The third system is marked *f* and *appassionato*. The fourth system is marked *dim.* and *a tempo*. The fifth system is marked *mf* and *cresc.*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The first system is marked *mf* and *a tempo (poco animato)*. The second system is marked *mf*. The third system is marked *f* and *appassionato*. The fourth system is marked *dim.* and *a tempo*. The fifth system is marked *mf* and *cresc.*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

*mf* *f* *pp* *pp* *mf* *cresc.*

*appassionato* *dim.* *a tempo*

*rall.*

*a tempo (poco animato)*

The musical score consists of five systems of piano music, each with a treble and bass staff. The notation includes various dynamics and tempo markings:

- System 1:** *cresc. ed accel. poco a poco*. Dynamics: *Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*.
- System 2:** *ff*, *rall.*, *[mf cresc.]*. Dynamics: *Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*.
- System 3:** *dim.*, *ff*, *mf a tempo*. Dynamics: *Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*.
- System 4:** *molto rall.*, *f*, *dim.*, *poco a poco*. Dynamics: *Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*.
- System 5:** *pp*, *ppp*. Dynamics: *Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*, *\* Teo.*.