



Cyril Scott

III RARE FINDS

It's A Jungle Out There

BY JOSEPH SMITH

The *Jungle Books* of Rudyard Kipling (1894 and 95) are as strange as they are compelling.

The two volumes are a loose collection of stories and poems

united by a single theme—the struggle for survival in an extreme climate, whether the jungle or the Arctic. Kipling reminds us that all characters are at once predators and prey; to him, this grim struggle is not only tragic—it is also “life-and-death fun.” Furthermore, Kipling sees animal behavior not as “instinct,” but rather as a “law of the jungle,” in which he perceives order and ethics.

It is mankind that puzzles him. Kipling conjures up as his hero and alter ego Mowgli, a boy reared in a pack of wolves. This upbringing causes Mowgli to view the ways of his own species with cold critical detachment. At the end, when Mowgli is compelled to accept his identity as a member of the “man-pack,” the reader feels more regret than relief. Just as the book can be read on many levels (a children’s book about talking animals? an adventure story? a bleak allegory of survival?), so the musical works it has inspired are remarkably diverse.

Most famous, of course, is the animated musical. *The Jungle Book* (let’s face it—the singular “Book” is justified by convenience and usage) was treated to the Procrustean hospitality of the Disney studio in 1967. The songs, by Richard M. and Robert B. Sherman, are in an old-fashioned razzmatazz Broadway style. Criticizing a children’s cartoon for radically altering the tone and content of the original is unwarranted, but the overwhelming popularity of the Disney version produces an unfortunate side effect: having seen the film, people mistakenly imagine they are familiar with *The Jungle Books*, little suspecting what Kipling’s original has to offer.

Cole Porter found the idea of a singing Mowgli de-ludicrous. His 1935 *Jubilee* (book by Moss Hart) was a musical comedy à clef—the characters were takeoffs on celebrities of the day. Thus Johnny Weissmuller, Tarzan of the movies, becomes Charles Rausmiller, Mowgli of the movies. Rausmiller’s song, “When Me, Mowgli, Love,” depicts him as a progenitor of *George of the Jungle*: “Me, little Mowgli, little bit slow....”

From American popular music, we turn to the refined sphere of French *mélodie*—the brilliantly effective *3 Chants de la Jungle* (in the voice of a kite, seal and tiger) by Maurice Delage (1879-1961), a protégé of Ravel. The language proves ideally suited to the seal’s tender lullaby, and if it lacks the hard-edged consonants of the English in the song of Chil, the cynical kite, the lightly percussive piano part provides an equivalent. The final song is in neither

English nor French, but in lightly-tripping Tiger language (as imagined by Delage).

Two significant (and very dissimilar) composers, Koechlin and Grainger, were not just inspired by *The Jungle Books*, but obsessed with them. Charles Koechlin (1867-1950) composed *Three Poems from the Jungle Book* for soloists, chorus, and orchestra in 1899. In 1940, he finished a cycle of four symphonic poems on the subject. A complete performance of the cycle lasts well over an hour, even without the optional inclusion of the *Three Poems*. Those who know Koechlin only from his piano pieces, which tend to be spare and Satie-like, will be astonished by the power, scope, and orchestral virtuosity of these poems. In the “Bandar-Log” movement, the imitativeness of the monkeys is expressed by parodies of contemporary compositional fashions, such as atonality and neo-classicism.

Percy Grainger (1882-1961) took even longer than Koechlin to complete his own *Jungle Book Cycle*—from 1898 to 1947. Not reared by wolves, Grainger nevertheless viewed human customs with the detachment of an outsider, and in this work his complete identification with wolf, tiger and seal produces a thrillingly eerie effect. The eleven choruses that constitute this cycle are as various as the parts of Kipling’s book—some are for male chorus, some for mixed, some are a *capella*, others accompanied by diverse instrumental combinations. A conductor might well be discouraged upon seeing, for instance, that “The Only Son” is scored for harmonium, piano, and strings, with oboe, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 3 trombones, kettledrums, and harp (although Grainger’s practice of “elastic scoring” does allow the instrumentation to be adapted to the performing forces at hand). Recordings have provided an invaluable service in disseminating works that are difficult to realize in concert, and we may be grateful to the recording conducted by Stephen Layton (Hyperion CDA66863) for granting us access to this powerful cycle.

The British composer Cyril Scott (1879-1970) was once famous for appealing pieces in an impressionist style. (It would, however, be unfair to define Scott by his most popular idiom. His first piano sonata of 1909 is cited by his admirers as a remarkably early example of changing, irregular meters.) His effective five-movement piano suite *Impressions from the Jungle Book* (1912) does not attempt to address Kipling’s deeper themes. In the book, for example, *Morning Song in the Jungle* is sung by wild animals with “yelping scorn” to intimidate intruding humans. Scott’s piece, with its rich harmonies and flexible melodic line, however, conjures up merely the morning quiet of the jungle, rather than the outrage of its inhabitants.

See *Morning Song in the Jungle* by Cyril Scott on page 6.



MORNING SONG IN THE JUNGLE

CYRIL SCOTT
(1879-1970)

Andante sosten.

p

sonore e espress.

5

10

15

pochiss. string

p

cresc.

20

cresc.

24

dim. *ritard.* *a tempo son.*

28

p

33

pp *p*

38

p

43

ppp