

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

BLACK EUROPEANS: A British Library Online Gallery feature by guest curator Mike Phillips

Taylor, Samuel Coleridge, composer, was born on 15 August 1875 at 15 Theobalds Road, Holborn, London - just round the corner from Fetter Lane, which Dickens described as the "dingiest collection of shabby buildings ever squeezed together in a rank corner as a club for tom cats". His parents were registered as Daniel Hugh Taylor, surgeon, and Alice Taylor, formerly Holmans.

Biographers are agreed that his father was in fact Dr Daniel Peter Hughes Taylor (c.1848-1904), who returned to his native Sierra Leone after studying at Taunton and King's College, London; but contrary to the claim in Samuel's birth certificate, there is no record of Dr Taylor's marriage to Alice. There is a mystery, also, to do with the fact that the mother with whom he grew up was known as Alice Hare Martin, (1856-1953) – the daughter of Emily Ann Martin - *not* Holmans. It appears, however, that a couple named Sarah and Benjamin Holman had a hand in Samuel's upbringing, and Holman gave young Samuel his first violin, along with his first violin lessons. The confusion might well have been a deliberate strategy to circumvent the stigma of illegitimacy. On the other hand, if the Alice of the birth certificate was the same woman as Alice Hare Martin, it is not clear how or why she and her son shifted with such ease from the worst slum in the city to the relative safety of suburban Croydon, and the warm bosom of a respectable working-class family.

Samuel seems never to have known his father, but what is notable is the number of good angels who seemed to be protecting and guiding his early footsteps. Alice Martin married George Evans (1837-c.1908), a railway storeman, with whom the boy seems to have been on good terms. They had three more children, who also took music lessons. One of them, Victor, became a professional musician. Samuel's early music training, however, was supervised by a Colonel Herbert A. Walters, variously described as a silk merchant, army volunteer, amateur musician and honorary choirmaster of St George's Church, Croydon. Coleridge-Taylor's daughter Avril (Gwendoline) suggests in her book that the Colonel might have been friends with his father, although there is no evidence to back this up. He also received violin lessons from Joseph Beckwith, a local orchestral musician, and he sang in the choir at St George's from the age of 10. After his voice broke he sang alto in the parish church of St Mary Magdalene, Addiscombe.

Coleridge-Taylor, as he pointed out in later life, was very well aware of the difficulties he faced because of the colour of his skin. His nickname at school, for instance, was 'coaley'. On the other hand, his friends clearly had something out of the ordinary in mind for his future, and in 1890 Colonel Walters arranged an interview at the Royal College of Music with Charles Grove, its head, (and editor/publisher of the *Grove Encyclopaedia of Music*). Coleridge-Taylor won a scholarship and was accepted for entry in the same year, originally as a student of violin, then graduating to

studying composition with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, the composer and one of the moving spirits behind the renaissance of English music in the late 19th century. At a stroke Coleridge-Taylor had levitated into the most influential musical environment within reach, and acquired patrons who could help make his career.

The Royal College of Music was an arena where Coleridge-Taylor encountered some of the brightest talents of his time. Although his first significant concert took place in Croydon (9 October 1893), most of his early concerts were at the RCM or involved RCM students. At a concert in March 1896, Avril reports, the composer Gustav Holst (*The Planets*) was playing the trombone while another great composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, played the triangle. Even before Coleridge-Taylor's work was being publicly performed, August Jaeger, an editor at Novello & Co, had been tipped off, and Novello's published the first of a series of Coleridge-Taylor's anthems, starting an association which was to last the whole of the composer's life. By coincidence, Vincent Novello, founder of the firm, had been taught by George Polgreen Bridgetower, the black violinist in the Regency period.

Coleridge-Taylor also won the Lesley Alexander composition prize two years running (1895 and 1896), and he met his best friend at the time, William Hurlstone, who died early in 1906, and who was a major influence on his taste. In the circles which mattered most to him at the time, Coleridge-Taylor's work and prospects were clearly being warmly nurtured. There is a typical and well-established story of his time at the RCM when Stanford, overhearing another student deliver a racial insult, rounded on the culprit and told him that Coleridge-Taylor had "more music in his little finger" than the other student had in "his whole body". All the evidence, therefore, contradicts the idea that his career was a simple one of struggle against racism.

In 1896 the African-American poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) visited London. His meeting with Coleridge-Taylor began a series of collaborations between the two. In some ways the partnership was logical, given Coleridge-Taylor's later interest in African America, and the 'crossover' reputation of Dunbar's genial but shallow verse. On the other hand, Coleridge-Taylor's frequent use of the label 'African' is deceptive. The songs *Seven African Romances* (1897) which opened the collaboration are light and tuneful, with hardly a dash of exoticism. *Dream Lovers* ("an Operatic Romance by Paul Laurence Dunbar and S. Coleridge-Taylor", 1898) is the story of a Moroccan prince and his friend finding true happiness with two sisters. Perhaps (and there are several clues to suggest this) Coleridge-Taylor's true *metier* might have been musical theatre, but he left the RCM as a highly esteemed and promising young composer.

Two years later (December 30 1899) he married Jessie Sarah Fleetwood Walmisley (1869-1962), who had been a fellow student at the RCM. They had a son, Hiawatha (1900-1980), and a daughter, Gwendolen, later Avril (1903-1998), who were both to have musical careers.

Far from labouring in the salt mines Coleridge-Taylor's talents were recognised and rewarded almost immediately. As seemed to be the case throughout most of his early career his path was smoothed by the agency of influential friends. His first major commission came via the composer Edward Elgar, who already knew about him from Jaeger. Elgar was offered a commission by the Three Choirs Festival, and finding himself unable to accept, recommended Coleridge-Taylor in his place. "*He still wants recognition & is far away the cleverest fellow going amongst the young men.*" (Source: Avril Coleridge-Taylor). The Three Choirs Festival, which dates from the 18th century, brings together choirs from Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester, rotating between these cathedral cities. More than 10 years later Ralph Vaughan Williams premiered *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* at the Festival. In September 1898 it was the turn of Coleridge-Taylor's *Ballade in A Minor*. A melodic piece, with echoes of the great European Romantics, Tchaikovsky and Dvorak, *Ballade* was immediately successful.

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast (from the poem by Henry Longfellow, 1898) was the medium on which Coleridge-Taylor soared to the top of the tree. The poem was already very popular in England, but had not yet been exploited by any well-known composer; Coleridge-Taylor was already a star in waiting. Novello's published the score in advance of the performance, and various luminaries committed themselves to attend. Sir Arthur Sullivan, although not far from death, insisted on turning up. Avril Coleridge-Taylor quotes him as saying – "*I'm always an ill man now, my boy, but I'm coming to hear your music to-night even if I have to be carried.*"

Hiawatha was a breath of fresh air in a choral repertoire which was intensely serious or religious, its light and airy tunefulness married to a straightforward development of the melody. At a popular level it was secular fun, its exoticism was superficial and familiar, a matter of feathers and skins and colourful names, but it was at the same time a big, lovely orchestral sound buoying up the excitement of a massed bank of voices singing a melody which flowed more or less continuously. In a time when amateur choirs and sheet music were a fundamental part of popular culture, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* was a score to enjoy. Its success made a sequel inevitable, and Coleridge-Taylor soon produced *The Death of Minnehaha* (October 1899) and *Hiawatha's Departure* (March 1900). The three pieces became the platform on which Coleridge-Taylor's musical reputation was founded. The sequels, however, came under fire from Coleridge-Taylor's former champions, Jaeger and Elgar, and his reputation never again reached the heights he achieved with *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*.

The music which followed *Hiawatha* was seen as failure, including the *Scenes from an Everyday Romance* suite (1900), and the concert overture *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1901). In 1903 the Three Choirs Festival commissioned another choral work, *The Atonement*, which was apparently too self-consciously religious and operatic to satisfy the public, which would continue to love *Hiawatha's Wedding*. Coleridge-Taylor had famously sold the rights to *Hiawatha* for a flat fee of £25 15s, although he

received £250 for the two sequels, more than twice his annual income at the time of his death. After the arrival of his son, Hiawatha, he had a family to support and he needed to continue working. Although he continued to compose he now took on a variety of other jobs. From 1898 to 1903, Coleridge-Taylor was chief conductor of the Croydon Symphony Orchestra. After the collapse of the CSO he supported two more seasons of "Coleridge-Taylor Orchestral Concerts", using his own money and several of his former musicians. Later on, this became the "String Players' Club" (1906), with Coleridge-Taylor as honorary leader.

From 1901 to 1904, Coleridge-Taylor was resident conductor to the Westmoreland Festival, and the Rochester Choral Society (1902–1907). In 1904, he became chief conductor to the Handel Society concerts, a post he held until his death. At the same time he served as guest conductor for various performances of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. By 1904, it had been performed 200 times in England.

During this period Coleridge-Taylor was also lecturing in Croydon. Later he joined Trinity College of Music (1903) and Crystal Palace School of Art and Music (1905) as professor of composition. In 1910 he taught as professor of composition at the Guildhall School of Music. In between jobs he acted as adjudicator at various festivals and competitions, making his first appearance in the role at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1900.

Coleridge-Taylor was a frequent collaborator of the actor-manager, Herbert Beerbohm Tree at His Majesty's Theatre. He is listed in the credits of several productions by Beerbohm Tree: *Ulysses* (1900), *Herod* (1902), *Nero* (1906 – with an entire programme of music), *Faust* (1908), and *Othello* (1912). He also wrote other choral works, (*A Tale of Old Japan*, 1911, is probably the best known), as well as pieces for strings and for piano, orchestral works, and an unpublished grand opera (*Thelma*, 1907-09).

It would not have been surprising if Coleridge-Taylor's private and domestic life suffered under the pressure of work, but there is plenty of evidence for the value he placed on his family life. The composer Havergal Brian leaves a charming glimpse of the couple (Coleridge-Taylor and his wife) when he bumped into them in Hanley - "A young Negro, bright and alert, passed by, accompanied by a lady whom I knew afterwards to be his wife. Both were strikingly winsome, and with *Hiawatha* in mind, I pictured them as journeying to the wedding feast." As described by Havergal Brian, the man himself seemed, overall, to be self-confident and at ease in his environment - "Coleridge-Taylor spoke in short, swift sentences, linked to many pleasantries. When he mounted the platform, he was confronted with 70 players of the Hallé orchestra and a chorus of 80 only. At the first entry of the chorus, he stopped suddenly and, addressing the orchestra, said rather dryly 'Gentlemen, half marks throughout!'" (Source: Havergal Brian)

Coleridge-Taylor's success and fame did not exempt him from racial harassment, or from the insecurity which it provoked. Most painful was the fact that his wife (Jessie Walmisley) was also a target of abuse. His

daughter records his response to groups of local youths who would often make comments about the colour of his skin: "When he saw them approaching along the street he held my hand more tightly, gripping it until it almost hurt."

It takes no great imagination to see in *Hiawatha's Wedding* a substitute for African American experience. Works like *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* reveal the influence of the African American poet, Dunbar. On the other hand, it seems that Coleridge-Taylor's understanding of race and racial conflict in the USA was gleaned from conversations with his friends and from the works of such writers as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. In a revealing quotation in the preface to *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* he writes: "What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk music, Dvorak for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for these Negro melodies." In other words, Coleridge-Taylor is an English composer responding to the same European influences as contemporaries like Ralph Vaughan Williams and, slightly later on, Percy Grainger.

Typically, perhaps, Coleridge-Taylor's view of his racial and African heritage seems to have been filtered through the African-American experience, and he seems to have had little or no contact or interest in Britain's relationships in the African continent or the Caribbean. He attended the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900, but it is worth pointing out that Pan-Africanism in those times was an ideological platform for the largely American diaspora, whose essential concerns were to do with material and social progress in New York or Washington. A different, more militant Pan-Africanism developed out of the activities of Africans like the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah and the Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta. In general the politics of the movement had been deeply influenced during the 1920s by the teachings of Marcus Garvey (the inspiration behind the birth of Rastafarianism), and a separatist who saw black rights as fundamentally wrapped up in the ownership of territory. After Garvey, Pan-Africanism had very different implications. Coleridge-Taylor's pride and interest in his African background certainly does him credit, but in terms of his work, in comparison with, for instance, his contemporary, the African-American composer Scott Joplin, it remains rhetorical, a mild colouring.

Coleridge-Taylor's visits to the USA were highpoints in his short career. Invited by the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society of Washington, DC (founded in 1901 by black choral singers), Coleridge-Taylor made three tours of the USA: in 1904, 1906 and 1910. He had long been a beacon for African-Americans visiting London, including the baritone Harry Burleigh and violinist Clarence Cameron White. Burleigh was reputed to be the man who introduced Dvorak to Negro spirituals, and he became one of Coleridge-Taylor's staunchest supporters in the USA. Mrs Mamie Hilyer turned up in 1900. She was a member of the Treble Clef Club, a Washington women's vocal club. In 1901 a Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Society for black singers was formed in Washington D.C. The African-American embrace must have been truly exciting for Coleridge-Taylor. On the one hand, the African-Americans saw a successful black British composer enjoying the status and dignity they

were trying to organise around their own choral music. On the other side of the coin, Coleridge-Taylor must have seen a large group of music lovers to whom he could be a focus rather than an exotic outsider. Nevertheless, he turned down the first invitation in 1901, and it was not until 1904, in the wake of the *Atonement's* poor showing at the Three Choirs Festival, that he made his first trip to Washington. The US Marines Band was engaged and the concert took place in Washington in front of an audience of 2700, two thirds of them black. *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* and *Five Choral Ballads From Texts by Longfellow* were published in the aftermath of that first tour, and subsequent tours also seemed to offer Coleridge-Taylor a new spurt of creativity.

Two further tours of the USA reinforced the composer's reputation there. Amazingly, during the 1910 tour Coleridge-Taylor was permitted to conduct exclusive white orchestras as well as African-Americans. Meanwhile he continued to write pieces in the traditional mode of English Light Music; for example, the *Petite Suite de Concert*, which contained the popular *Demande et Response*, for a long time a staple feature of the piano student's repertoire. He was said to have preferred *A Tale of Old Japan* (1911) to *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, and in his final year he undertook his last commission, his *Violin Concerto*, whose first version, on its way to the US première, apparently went down with the *Titanic*. Ironically, the central movement was based on a spiritual entitled *Keep Me from Sinking Down*.

On the 28 August, Coleridge-Taylor collapsed at West Croydon station while waiting for a train. He died a few days later of acute pneumonia at his home, Aldwick, St Leonard's Road, Croydon, on 1 September 1912, at the age of 37. Overwork seems to have a contributing factor. At the time he was improving his German, in anticipation of visiting that country.

Coleridge-Taylor was buried in Bandon Hill Cemetery, and his funeral became a major public event. A memorial concert produced £1440 for the family: a tidy sum given that Coleridge-Taylor's income in the year of his death has been estimated at less than £200. The Guildhall School of Music arranged bursaries for both of his children, and they went on to become professional musicians themselves. The widow received a Civil List pension of £100 in recognition of Coleridge-Taylor's work. Not all that shabby; but, in the event, the music world was shocked by the fact that Coleridge-Taylor and his family were not to receive any royalties from the fabulously commercial *Hiawatha's Wedding*, and the scandal was part of the impetus behind the formation of the Performing Rights Society with the intention of lobbying for legislation on rights and royalties.

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast continued to be a hugely popular piece, throughout the 1920s and 30s, with colourful performances at the Royal Albert Hall. The viola-player Leo Birnbaum remembers playing *Hiawatha* many times there, amid a crowd of colourfully costumed singers. After the Second World War Coleridge-Taylor's music disappeared from sight, more or less suddenly. It is fashionable to blame racism, and a look at the judgements in some of his obituaries seems to bear out this view. On the other hand, performances of this kind were unlikely to survive the decline

of the amateur and semi-professional choral tradition, as well as the shift in the magnetic centre of popular music. The showmanship of conductors like Sir Malcolm Sargent was part of the cantata's support in the pre-war years. Later on the atmosphere had changed.

Critical opinion had moved on. Coleridge-Taylor's music was very fine, but it seemed at first sight to inhabit a light classical tradition which failed to command critical attention. Even such luminaries as Grainger could not hold the position they occupied in previous years, and it is possible to identify other very fine English musicians who suffered equal or worse neglect. Coleridge-Taylor's real legacy will continue to be what it was in the first place. The manner and the style of his talent drew on his ambiguous and difficult origins, without shutting him off from the currents of his time and place. He became, against the odds, part of his culture's tradition, while openly declaring the mixture - foreign and domestic - of elements and ideas which moved him, and it is his ability to flourish in between cultures and to base himself within the junction of different platforms which gives his persona, and his music, the power to speak to our times.

Text by Mike Phillips. Copyright The British Library Board.
