Erasing the color line: the violin concerto of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

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Keywords: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Maud Powell, Harry Burleigh, African American, black composer

URI: http://hdl.handle.net/2022/21027

Date: 2016-10-06

Abstract:

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s mixed-black heritage, which easily could have remained a social handicap in 19th century Victorian England, may arguably have boosted his career during a time when African-heritage music and artists became fashionable amongst the European and American public. That is not to say that Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s world was not imbued with racial prejudice – born a mere 43 years after England’s Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, his three visits to America brought him in contact with the segregation experienced daily by African Americans. Nevertheless, when Antonin Dvořák’s New World Symphony (1893) sought to establish an American school of music upon the melodies of Negro and Native American songs, black American musicians and composers rode on the tidal waves of Dvořák’s success. They were able, for the first time, to see the significance of their musical heritage. It is significant to note that while this black cultural revolution was brewing in America, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was operating overseas in England. Nor was he, at first, transforming African and African American music into high art. Yet his career and rise to fame were intertwined with the ongoings experienced daily by African Americans, and without Dvořák and black activists giving a voice to African American musicians and composers, it is plausible that many of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s works would have never come into fruition. One of these works was his Violin Concerto op. 80, the last finished work before his untimely death at the age of 37. This project will argue that the African American musical and political scene between 1893 and 1920 helped the creation of Coleridge-Taylor’s Violin Concerto.

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Coleridge-Taylor’s world was not imbued with racial prejudice – born a mere 43 years after England’s Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, his three visits to America brought him in contact with the segregation experienced daily by African Americans. Samuel COLERIDGE-TAYLOR (1875–1912) Violin Concerto in G minor Op.  If the series continues this well we should watch out for the violin concertos of Haydn Wood, Gaze Cooper, Robin Milford, Arthur Benjamin, Arthur Bliss, Jean Coulthard, Eugene Goossens, Leroy Robertson, Gordon Jacob and so many others. The Coleridge-Taylor has been recorded before on the Avie Label where it was in safe and sound harness with the Dvořák. There Philippe Graffin took only thirty seconds less than Marwood. It’s hardly a surprise that Coleridge-Taylor was dubbed ‘the colored Dvořák’ by Maud Powell, the work’s first soloist. Powell premiered the concerto on 4 June 1912 at the Berkshire Festival in the USA. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor had good luck and bad luck in his career as a composer. He had the good luck to have his choir teacher pay his tuition to the Royal College of Music where he learned his craft under Charles Stanford. But he also had the bad luck to have his early cantata Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast become such an enormously popular hit that the resulting overload of commissions and thus of work drove him to his grave at 37. Coleridge-Taylor’s music, too, had its ups and downs. Take as an example his three-movement Violin Concerto from 1912. Commissioned for performance in America