

Do we really know Samuel Coleridge-Taylor?

by

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Let's remind ourselves what everybody knows about Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the composer.

He was born in central London in August 1875. He spent his childhood there while his African father **Dr D. P. H. Taylor** worked in **Croydon**. Faced with racism by his patients, Dr Taylor returned to Sierra Leone where he died. The boy's mother, Alice, remarried and with her railway worker husband **George Evans** they all moved to **Croydon**. The choirmaster at his church, a Colonel Walters, encouraged him and arranged for him to study, aged 15, at the Royal College of Music.

At the Royal College of Music young Coleridge (as his family called him) won a scholarship and met a fellow student who became his wife. After seven years at the College he became a professional musician, and, guided by **Edward Elgar**, attained some recognition that, in November 1898, became national when the College presented the premiere of Hiawatha's Wedding Feast in a brilliant performance conducted by his old professor **Charles Villiers Stanford**.

With two more parts the complete Song of Hiawatha of 1900 was well received and its sales made a fortune for publisher **Novello** and Company. Not for the composer for **Novello** had purchased the works and no royalties were paid to the composer. Married, with a son and daughter, the composer struggled all his life, never taking holidays, and the combination of hard work and pneumonia killed him, aged 37, in 1912. His family was left near destitute.

During his life he had identified with the struggles of black people in America, Africa and in Britain- taking a leading role in the Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900 and then being a committee member as was **Frederick Loudin**, the American who had introduced him to black American culture - an influence reinforced by poet **Paul Dunbar** who worked with the composer in London in 1897. Coleridge-Taylor was invited to the USA by black Americans, and went there three times.

His works included a symphony, and a now-lost opera, as well as compositions for the violin and the piano (he played both instruments). After his death his reputation faded, and his music was seldom performed.

There are two-dozen statements of fact in those sentences. Sixteen - over half- are simply not true. But they are in the books and on the web.

Let me replace some of the falsehoods and perhaps you will agree with me that the man's achievements were even more astonishing than generally thought.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor had no contact with his Sierra Leonean doctor father at all. **Dr Taylor**, who had studied in England for six years, left London unaware his girlfriend was pregnant. No racism in **Croydon** - and no professional father to finance the family either.

The teenage Alice, his mother, had her illegitimate black baby at home - where her father lived with his wife (who was not Alice's mother).

The family relied on the baby's grandfather Benjamin Holmans, a skilled workingman who took his family including his black grandson to Croydon within 18 months of the boy's birth. Holmans played the violin and owned a piano. His eldest son (also a Benjamin) was a professional musician, and at least two of the other grandchildren were professional musicians. So the future composer had a musical grandfather, a musical uncle, and musical cousins. The lad had his first violin lessons from his grandfather - they shared the same house in Croydon - and then studied with a professional tutor. There was money for that. The burgess rolls or lists of voters reveal that Coleridge's grandfather had two votes, for he paid rent on two Croydon properties, at a time when rent payments by others were too small to qualify for one vote. Holmans was a shoeing smith or farrier, fitting shoes on to the thousands of horses that worked the streets of late 19th century England.

The Croydon house was 25ft from the railway line. Steam trains puffed and rattled across the street (not in a cutting, not on an embankment, but level with the pavement) Take a walk down Waddon New Road and you will get a feel for this. During his childhood, across the tracks was a slaughterhouse, and the prevailing wind blew the noise and smells to the Holmans' home. It was from that house that the boy went on to the Royal College of Music where he surpassed older and more experienced students: who had studied at university, travelled in Germany and France, and had all been at school for longer than Coleridge-Taylor, who left his local school aged 13.

Edward Elgar, usually seen as providing the youngster with a crucial recommendation and thus a commission to write a new work for a music festival, also had an unpromising start to life, being raised above his father's music shop in Worcester. Elgar's immersion in music was, like Coleridge-Taylor with the Holmans, at the earliest age. His emergence took far longer - had Elgar died at 37, like Coleridge-Taylor. he would be just a footnote in the history of music in England.

Whereas Coleridge-Taylor's Four Characteristic Waltzes for the piano had been selling well since early 1897 and were issued in versions for groupings of instruments from duets to orchestras. The composer's reputation was high before he left college in 1897, strong enough to enable him to embark on a career as a professional musician. Between the end of 1898 and the early part of 1900 - the period of the public premieres of the Song of Hiawatha (three parts plus an overture) - Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's reputation as a composer was far higher than that of Elgar, who had three times failed to make any impression on musical people in London.

Coleridge-Taylor's involvement in the Pan-African Conference was largely symbolic - he was the youngest delegate and completely lacked the experience of the others: John Alcindor, a graduate in medicine at Edinburgh University had been to an excellent school in Trinidad and won. aged 19. an Island Scholarship. W E B Du Bois had studied at Harvard and in Berlin He was in Europe to man the Negro stand of the American section at the Universal Exhibition in Paris. Other delegates had been slaves, some had lived in Africa, and some had immense responsibilities as teachers, lecturers, church leaders. Coleridge-Taylor arranged the musical intervals and published the programme. And made friends. Life-long in the case

of Alcindor and Du Bois.

There must be time to talk about finance. The absence of royalties was normal at the time - Elgar sold Land of Hope and Glory for pence. Coleridge-Taylor's known income as a professional musician was about £500 per year: if you take the price of a stamp guaranteeing delivery next day, that is, today, £40,000 per year. You could buy a house in the London suburbs for £300 then. So that would make his annual income, today, at least £500,000. He and the family did take holidays - and had two house servants.

His widow eventually sold the manuscripts of the music - including the symphony and the 'lost' opera - to the British Museum, and was paid more than most people earned in two years at work. The value of Coleridge-Taylor's estate was over £1,000 - three suburban London houses or fees for 20 years of study at the Royal College of Music.

The Royal College of Music premiere of the first part of the Song of Hiawatha. Hiawatha's Wedding Feast, was far from successful. Not only did the college lack a concert hall, the student orchestra was under-rehearsed. Why? Because the premiere had been scheduled for Sunderland later in that month of November 1898. It was grabbed by Professor Stanford - you can't blame him, for he was professor of composition at the Royal College of Music and Coleridge-Taylor was his first successful pupil (it can be argued that he had just two others by the time he died in the 1920s).

Three more points - his music for the theatre (and he created at least four such works) was well paid (possibly £300 for each commission) and was performed to 12,000 people each week. Each play ran on to a total audience of at least 200,000. One play went from London to New York in 1906 - where his name is not printed on the programme because he was by then known to be a black Englishman.

And the decline in popularity? Not true. The Royal Albert Hall in Kensington (which could hold 7 to 8,000) sold out for a fortnight most summers between the wars with a costumed version of Hiawatha. An abridged version was issued on disc (and sold for more than most people took home after a week's work) and that revenue saved the Royal Choral Society from bankruptcy as well as introducing thousands to the music. It remained popular, which is why it was recorded on vinyl in the 1950s and on CD in the 1990s. And that's why, in 1975, one of London's famous blue plaques was placed on his house in Croydon. Hiawatha is still performed.

As for black influences on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, consider that he had written a poem about Africa in 1896, that in 1901 two young women from Ghana were at a private school about 10 minutes walk from his home, and that in the orphanage opposite the now-plaque bearing house there lived a black teenage woman in 1906.

One might reverse the focus and say that men and women of African descent needed Coleridge-Taylor. He had social and professional success in the largest city in the world, in a nation that dominated the affairs of millions through commerce, education and imperialism. Not like Professor Du Bois in his black college in Atlanta, Georgia or Booker T. Washington in a remote corner of the cotton belt in Alabama.

And his father, Dr Taylor? Soon dismissed from the colonial medical service in Sierra Leone,

where he had been replaced by another England-qualified **Krio** who met the standards required, he died in Banjul, Gambia, in 1904; from dysentery. He had a daughter there, who was still alive in the 1930s.

And his mother. Alice? Died in Croydon in 1953, aged almost 100.

And the music - still alive. And on several CDs. Listen to the music.

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