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COLERIDGE-TAYLOR : THE LIFE
or Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in reality
Talk presented at the British Library, London,
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by Jeffrey Green

Let me give you some bare-bones facts, to start with.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in London in August 1875, and died days after his 37th birthday, in Croydon in September 1912. His death was reported globally. That was because his 1898-1900 Scenes from the Song of Hiawatha had caught and held the public's imagination. Three pieces for orchestra, choir, and solo singers, with an instrumental overture, it was performed throughout the English-speaking world, was adapted for the stage in the 1920s, and is available on CD today.

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The reality of the composer's life – in fifteen minutes – now begins.
Eighteen year old Alice Martin was not married, so the birth of her son in August 1875 might well have led her to place him in one of the children's homes recently established by Dr Thomas Barnardo. But she was supported by her father, and it was with him that her baby - Samuel Coleridge Taylor - was raised. This grandfather gave him his first violin lessons and then paid for formal lessons. He provided for his daughter and grandson, and shared the home in Croydon until he died in 1896.

At that time his grandson was in his seventh and final year at the Royal College of Music in London. This was not surprising for Coleridge-Taylor's uncle was a professional musician (he was listed in the 1861 census as "professor of music"). When we trace Coleridge-Taylor's uncle in 1891, we see that Coleridge-Taylor's cousins were also described as musicians.

Coleridge-Taylor started at the Royal College of Music in September 1890, weeks after his fifteenth birthday. The Easter 1891 report noted he was "commended" for his violin and piano studies. At the end of that first year he had "very good reports". Later reports included "excellent", and "very satisfactory". He dropped the violin to take composition as his main subject from the beginning of his third year. The fees (some £50 per year) had been guaranteed by a young silk merchant and officer in the volunteers, Herbert Walters (they may have been paid by his grandfather) but from March 1893 the lad benefited from a scholarship.

His compositions were reported in the London press – in February 1895 The Times noted his "very remarkable skill and originality". The weekly Musical News regarded him as "a talented young composer" and the Musical Times thought

individuality was found "in rare abundance in the works of that most gifted of College scholars, S. Coleridge-Taylor". He was nineteen years old – a hard working, creative student of promise.

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Let's look at his father. Coleridge-Taylor's father's family sent their youngest son Daniel to a private school in Somerset. He then studied medicine at King's College Hospital, in London where in November 1874 he qualified as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons. Dr Daniel Taylor gathered his possessions and returned to his parents. They were wealthy Africans living in Freetown, Sierra Leone whose two other sons were very successful in business. Dr Taylor was in Freetown in February 1875. Six months later Dr Taylor's son – the future composer – was born in London. Dr Taylor probably had not known his friend was pregnant.

Dismissed from the colonial medical service after one year (he was replaced by another African who had been to the same Somerset school and qualified at King's College), Dr Taylor ended up in Banjul (then: Bathurst) in the colonial backwater of the Gambia, where he died from dysentery in 1904. There is a possibility that Dr Taylor was in London in 1897. Otherwise he had no contact with his son.

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The composer's mother is our focus now. Alice Hare Martin was born in Dover in September 1856. Her mother registered the birth, and named no father. Alice's father was blacksmith Benjamin Holmans, a married man with four other children. The 1861 and 1871 census list the Holmans at 15 Theobalds Road, Holborn. Alice was there in 1871, still at school, aged 14, which reveals more on the family. Let me stress this: school fees had to be paid into the 1870s, and a child at school also meant he or she brought in no wages. Many children left school at the age of ten, some never went to school.

Road widening demolished their Theobalds Road home – where Coleridge-Taylor had been born - by 1877, so the district had no impact on the composer - the family relocated to the rapidly expanding town of Croydon in 1876-1877. Holmans, his wife Sarah, young Alice and her son are listed in the 1881 census at 67 Waddon New Road, Croydon which was Coleridge-Taylor's home into the Royal College of Music years. Trains puffed smoke and rattled by on the other side of Waddon New Road, and the house was downwind of a slaughterhouse. But it wasn't an orphanage.

Holmans died aged 84, in 1896, in the house of his daughter Alice and grandson Coleridge. Alice and her partner George Evans had a son and two daughters including Marjorie Evans. I was privileged to meet Marjorie Evans on many occasions in the 1980s. She had been 16 when her famous half-brother died. She made it clear that her undemonstrative mother had been a strong personality – and was much loved by her first-born son, the composer.

Alice's mother Emily Martin also relocated to Croydon. Marjorie Evans recalled her visiting the family in the 1900s and giving them gold coins. Known as Emma Martin, she was a house servant, living with her employers in a grand house.

Brought up in a steady home, with a solid financial background (old Holmans had two votes because of the rental values of properties), with musical relatives, singing brought Coleridge-Taylor to the attention of Herbert Walters who later guaranteed the fees at the Royal College of Music.

The family could afford to ignore the boy's potential earnings, allowing him to attend the Royal College of Music from the age of fifteen – for seven years.

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With his African father absent from his life, we need to consider African or black influences on Coleridge-Taylor. The composer showed his African descent and although black people were not as rare in late 19th century England as we have been led to believe, he was a black person in a white society.

For years it has been thought that his initial contact with a black American person was in 1896. The composer's first biographer, William Berwick Sayers wrote in 1915 that Paul Dunbar, the "American negro poet" paid a visit to England in 1896 and "early sought the acquaintance of the musician" with the "immediate result" of a joint recital in London, repeated in Croydon in January 1897. Dismiss this. Dunbar came to England in February 1897. There was no early acquaintance and no "immediate" result (their joint recital was in London in June 1897).

The truth of the connection with Dunbar is more moving and gives us a valuable insight into Coleridge-Taylor -- for Coleridge-Taylor sought out Dunbar. He was already aware of his black identity and had been exploring it.

"The African Society of Literati, Musicians, and Artists: London and New York: Established 1897" was the letterhead on a note from the composer to a fellow musician, dated 4 October 1897. Coleridge-Taylor had been interested in Africa since late 1896. By the way, Dunbar did not live in New York.

Coleridge-Taylor's set of songs with piano, using Dunbar's words, was entitled African Romances. It was presented at their London recital. One was orchestrated; all seven were published. His next work with a black title was the African Suite (1898) for the piano.

Coleridge-Taylor said that American choir leader Frederick Loudin introduced him to the music of his people, by which he meant Negro Spirituals. Coleridge-Taylor used a Spiritual as a theme in the overture to The Song of Hiawatha (1900).

After 1900 there were other works with "Negro" or "African" in the title. One used a Yoruba theme Coleridge-Taylor obtained from an African woman in London. This was in 1903 or 1904.

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In 1897 Coleridge-Taylor left College, to work as a composer. Soon his Four Characteristic Waltzes were selling in several versions – solo piano at first, then for violin and piano, then in mid-1898 with parts for all string instruments. In April The Times had noted that his music was "full of character and originality", and at the beginning of that year it had "heartedly recommended" another piano piece "to all amateurs who care for the more poetic side of music". Remember this was 1898, and Coleridge-Taylor was 22 years old.

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast was completed in May, six months before its premiere. Copies of proofs of the music created considerable interest. Before a note had been heard in public a choral festival commissioned Coleridge to write a new piece for them. This was the second part of The Song of Hiawatha.

Coleridge-Taylor had fame in musical circles before Hiawatha; some of the twenty five and more works he created before Hiawatha continued to be performed, to be sold, and are on CDs today. So too are works created after 1900.

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We must look at the misunderstanding that the composer was a poor man who was badly treated by music publishers.

He sold Hiawatha's Wedding Feast for some £15. An outright payment and a handful of free copies was a standard arrangement.

The size of the payment could be large if the composer's reputation was equally grand. How much was paid? Dvorak received £250 for his Stabet Mater (1884) and £200 for the Spectre's Bride (1885). This was a time when £300 a year was a decent income – a house in suburban London sold at that price. Elgar's very successful Enigma Variations of 1899 earned him £8 in five years, and he sold outright "Land of Hope of Glory", for pennies.

After the success of Hiawatha's Wedding Feast, Novello the publisher paid Coleridge-Taylor an annual fee for the right of first refusal. They purchased the other pieces, giving him an annual income of over £500 by 1900.

Other publishers paid him too, and his several contributions – at least five – of theatrical music for London impresario Beerbohm Tree probably earned him £300 each. Fees from judging music festivals and from teaching brought in £100 per year minimum. The aristocratic Handel Society paid him to conduct, possibly £50 for every concert, and for rehearsals, and they gave two concerts a year. He conducted other groups too. He was paid for his three visits to the United States – the first, all-black concert series in Washington in 1904 paid him over $800 (then £160).

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Underestimating Coleridge-Taylor has a long history.

The illegitimacy, his upbringing right next to the railway tracks, the unpromising schooling in Croydon, and the absent father are aspects of his life that have been ignored. Little attention has been paid to the music-loving grandfather and none to those professional musicians, his uncle and cousins. His hard work at the Royal College of Music has not been noted.

His achievements were possible because of the stability of his home, run by his mother. Unorthodox by official standards, the Holmans / Martin / Evans family provided for him. So did the historically silent Mrs Benjamin Holmans, whose tolerance of her husband's bastard daughter, and of that daughter's black baby, deserves consideration. Here we may want to remind ourselves of that other silent woman, the African grandmother, Sally Taylor of Freetown.

Coleridge-Taylor's upbringing – the support from grandfather Holmans, grandmother Emily Martin, and his mother Alice – gave him strength to persevere with music, to search out his African heritage, to mix with the Handel Society's blue bloods, and with the professors, conductors, instrumentalists, and prima donnas.

He conducted choirs and orchestras of hundreds. The audience numbered more than 7,000 at the Royal Albert Hall in 1900 for the first full performance of The Song of Hiawatha.

Like all creative artists his works included failures and successes: commissions came from music festivals, and publishers took up his creations: and rejected some. Recording companies – battling primitive technology and nervous performers – tried to record his music 140 times between 1906 and 1927.

Thousands attended the annual Albert Hall performances in the 1920s and 1930s. Two weeks of Hiawatha in costume every summer.

His music was reprinted again and again, year after year. Singers, pianists and violin players performed his music for their friends. All over the English-speaking world choirs sang – to full houses – the Song of Hiawatha. And his music remains in performance today.

When he died he left over £1,000, two school aged children, and a widow who had been brought up with no expectation that she would work for a living – she had studied singing at the Royal College of Music. She died in 1962.

His mother died in 1953.

Coleridge-Taylor left a wonderful legacy. Listen to his music!

Thank you for listening to me.

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