

Talking Classical

By Jessica Duchen

Published: 05 August 2005

One late-summer day in 1912, a young man collapsed at West Croydon station. A few days later he was dead, of pneumonia exacerbated by exhaustion through overwork. His name was Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and he was Britain's first successful black classical composer.

He'd made a huge error: he had sold his publisher the rights to a choral work entitled *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* for a flat fee of £15 15s. The oratorio became the most popular piece of its kind in the UK since Handel's *Messiah* - but its hapless composer, struggling to support his wife and daughter through teaching, conducting, and writing light music, saw no benefit from it.

This year, Coleridge-Taylor's greatest work: his Violin Concerto in G minor has made it to the Proms. Since its premiere in America less than three months before the composer's death, it has been performed only a handful of times - and Coleridge-Taylor, who couldn't make the journey to the US premiere, did not live to hear it. Now it is ripe for rediscovery yet, inevitably, faces being pigeonholed as a dusty British rarity. But the concerto isn't only British in character; it's far too beautiful for the "rarity" shelf; and it contains an agenda that speaks volumes about the composer's pride in his mingled English and African heritage.

Coleridge-Taylor was born in 1875, the son of an English mother and a father from Sierra Leone. As well as becoming one of his generation's most promising composers, he was an early campaigner in the black activist movement in Britain, feeling that he had a personal mission to boost the dignity of his race (although he was half-African, he took after his father in appearance). He was greatly influenced by the black American poet PL Dunbar and founded a newspaper in London, *The African and Orient Review*, with his Pan-Africanist friend Duse Mohammed Ali. Many of his works were based on the stories and folk music of Afro-Americans and Amerindians. He chose to set *Hiawatha* largely because he identified with its idealistic images of a race that was oppressed yet proud and beautiful.

The violin concerto was commissioned by an American benefactor for the American violinist Maud Powell, and Coleridge-Taylor's first idea was to base the piece on Negro spirituals. Yet, after completing the work, he withdrew it and wrote a new, entirely original, concerto. Yet the inspiration of the spirituals lingers tellingly in some of its luscious, abundant melodies.

"The music is in some ways extremely British, but also open to many different cultures," says Philippe Graffin, the violin soloist at the Prom and on the concerto's first recording. "There's certainly the influence of Negro spirituals in the opening theme, and in the slow movement one can hear an element of oriental exoticism, rather like Puccini's Madama Butterfly."

Coleridge-Taylor's father, a doctor, had returned to Sierra Leone upon discovering that the Victorian English did not want to be treated by a black man. As a violin and composition student at the Royal College of Music, Coleridge-Taylor was sometimes the butt of jibes from his classmates. Once, his composition professor, Charles Stanford, leapt to his defence, telling the class that he had "more talent in his little finger" than the rest of them put together. Later, he contemplated moving to the USA, where he had been welcomed as a hero and dubbed "the black Mahler".

A major influence in the piece is Coleridge-Taylor's musical idol, Dvorak - whose use of Negro spirituals and passion for Longfellow's Hiawatha had a profound impact on the young British composer. The presence of Elgar, who admired and encouraged Coleridge-Taylor, also lurks in the orchestration and the emotional directness - "he is far and away the cleverest fellow among the young men," Elgar opined."

Since its first enduring resurrection in modern times, on Avie Records last year, Classic FM has seized on the concert's gorgeous slow movement for frequent broadcasts, helping to make it a bestseller. "It's a perfect piece for the Proms," Graffin says. "It's beautifully written for the violin, but it isn't pompous, pretentious or over-ambitious; instead, it's sincere, meaningful and full of charm.'

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's Violin Concerto will be played at Prom 35, Royal Albert Hall, London SW9 (020-7589 8212) on 9 August.