

# Frederick Delius's "Zwei Braune Augen"

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On March 2, 1884, twenty-two-year-old Fritz Delius--he did not change his name to Frederick until 1902--set sail from Liverpool for America with the intention of managing a large orange plantation in the then primitive State of Florida. Disembarking in Jacksonville, a backward but booming city of around 17,000 inhabitants, he traveled by river steamer to his lush plantation, Solano Grove, forty miles south up the St. Johns River, then the gateway to America's southern wilderness frontier. The "mighty river," as he would later allude to it in his tone poem *Appalachia*, was almost four miles wide at the point where his farm house was located. His African-American helpers, descended from slaves, were waiting on the river bank to assist the novice orange grower. From Bradford, England, Delius's father, a prosperous native-born German wool merchant, had sent his wayward son to the United States in the expectation that the young man would abandon his passion to follow music as a career and turn to the sensible business of making more money for the growing family fortune. Surely the headstrong young man would be too busy with his oranges to think about musical improvisation and his urge to abandon the family business.

Neglecting the oranges, Delius spent many evenings listening to the singing on his plantation and on the riverboats passing during the night on their voyages back and forth from Jacksonville to Palatka, an old river town ten miles farther up river. Delius later described the special ambiance that convinced him that he *must* become a composer: "I used to get up early and be spellbound watching the silent break of dawn over the river; Nature awakening--it was wonderful! At night the sunsets were all aglow--spectacular. Then the coloured folk on neighbouring plantations would start singing instinctively in parts as I smoked a cigar on my verandah."<sup>1</sup> For the rest of his life he would attempt to recreate this unforgettable union of nature and music. But there was a problem. He lacked the training to fulfill his ambition.

Fate soon intervened in the form of an unusually gifted Catholic church organist, Thomas F. Ward (1856-1912), a consumptive who had recently moved from Brooklyn to Jacksonville in the hope of improving his health. Meeting Delius by chance in a Jacksonville music store, Ward, a pianist and composer versed in the music of the masters--Bach, Mendelssohn, Chopin--and in the American salon tradition, immediately

sensed the young man's remarkable talent for harmonic improvisation. Delius hired him on the spot to move to Solano Grove and teach him the rudiments of music theory, which he accomplished during the next six months.

Ward, an orphan raised by the Catholic church in Brooklyn, is perhaps the most mysterious personality in the Delius biography, a man about whom very little has been known until recently.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual, devoutly religious, demanding from his students the highest standards of learning and conduct, Ward was nevertheless tormented by his own past. The son of a priest and an Irish kitchenmaid, he had been abandoned by his father and given over to the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brooklyn, who instilled in him a lifelong faith in the Church and a determination to pursue disciplined and purposeful activity. But his moral character had been shaped at a high price. Plagued by guilt about his concealed past, he wandered restlessly throughout the South in search of a cure for his tuberculosis and for spiritual peace. After a failed attempt to become a priest in a Benedictine monastery in central Florida, he eventually settled in Houston, Texas, where he died in 1912 and was buried in a pauper's grave.

Throughout his life, Delius acknowledged the profound influence of Ward's training, claiming repeatedly that Ward's course had been far more important than his subsequent studies at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1886-1887. The relationship between Delius and Ward was complicated, however, by the fact that Ward was a devout Christian, while Delius was already on the way to becoming the hater of organized religion and admirer of Nietzsche that he remained until the end of his life. Whatever the case, as Delius's invaluable amanuensis Eric Fenby later noted, Ward "had known his pupil for what he was--a headstrong, boisterous, hot-blooded young fellow with more than a streak of the adventurer in him--and he had taken him well in hand."<sup>3</sup> The essence of Ward's message to Delius can be found in the following lines of Lord Byron, which Ward had underlined in a volume of Byron's verses he later sent to Delius in Leipzig:

The youth who trains, or runs a race,  
Must bear privations with unruffled face  
Be call'd to labour when he thinks to dine,  
And, harder still, leave wenching, and his wine.

Several bits of Florida juvenilia have survived from the period of Delius's study with Ward and his short sojourn in Jacksonville thereafter. Among them may be cited the piano pieces "Pensées Mélodieuses," "Zum Carnival" (the latter published in Jacksonville in 1885), and the songs "Over the Mountains High" and "Zwei braune

Augen," the composition under discussion here.<sup>4</sup> The brief song is set to a poem by Hans Christian Andersen ("To brune Øjne" from *Hjertets Melodier*) in a German version by Wilhelm Henzen. The two-page ink manuscript, like its companion song "Over the Mountains High" (text by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson), is signed "Fritz Delius 1885."<sup>5</sup>

*nicht schnell* Zwei braune Augen  
H.C. Andersen  
Fritz Delius 1885

lingel ge-sehen zwei Augen braun  
denn was mehr

Heil mein Volk ge-ahnen  
H. Heil so hehrlich und  
*Ritardando molto* *u. tempo.*

Kindlich sein, sein sie und immer  
mag ich denn sein  
*Ritardando*

Significantly, from Delius's American period (1884-1886), only "Zwei braune Augen" is to be found in a list of Delius's compositions published in the first substantial study of his life and music, that of his friend and protégé Philip Heseltine (1894-1930). The brilliant songwriter and critic, who often used the pseudonym Peter Warlock, was a worshipper of the music of Delius. Delius became almost a father substitute and confided in him a wealth of previously unknown details about both his music and his past cosmopolitan adventures. He not only saved the manuscript of his fledgling song--he later destroyed many other scores--but permitted it to be placed as the first on the listing which Heseltine (with Delius's approval) described as "not altogether complete but including every work of any importance."<sup>6</sup> (It is followed by the now popular *Florida Suite* of 1887.) Andersen's short love lyric must have appealed to Delius, a romantically inclined youth whose cultured family appreciated the German romantic literary tradition:

Hab' jüngst gesehen zwei Augen braun,  
d'rin war mein Heil, mein' Welt zu schau'n.  
O Blick so liebeich und kindlich rein,  
nein nie und nimmer vergess' ich dein!<sup>7</sup>

I recently saw two brown eyes,  
Therein were my well-being and my world to be seen.  
What a look, as loving and pure as a child's,  
No, I shall never ever forget you!  
(Translated by Sabine Feisst)

There is no evidence of African-American influence in the song, although a suggestion of the American sentimental parlor tradition--the tradition of Gottschalk, Richard Hofmann, George William Warren, and their followers--can be detected. But the text itself might lend some credence to Delius's later confession to Percy Grainger that he had had a black sweetheart in Florida, a "lost love" whom he never forgot. According to Grainger, Delius returned to Florida in 1897 for the purpose of locating his mistress and their child.<sup>8</sup> If true, this woman (with two brown eyes and an unforgettable look?) could have partly inspired much of his music ("my world") and particularly those later works whose theme is lost love or the purity of youthful love--"Sea Drift," "Songs of Sunset," and "Idyll," to name only a few. However, aside from the inferences of his music and Grainger's account--Delius sometimes invented stories on the spot and Grainger tended to take people at their word--there is no proof that these romantic events ever occurred. The frequent assertion that in Florida Delius contracted the syphilis that would

eventually cause his paralysis, blindness and, in 1934, his death in Grez-sur-Loing in France has been thoroughly discredited.<sup>9</sup>

Delius could take pride in a youthful creation which takes its place among the other Scandinavian settings that followed in the 1880s and 1890s--*Five Songs from the Norwegian*, *Seven Songs from the Norwegian*, and *Seven Danish Songs*. In ternary form, "Zwei braune Augen" moves briefly from G Major towards E Major before returning to the tonic. Interestingly, its thirty-four measures reveal primitive elements of Delius's later mature style. Although its harmony is diatonic, it contains chromatic inflections suggesting the influence of Chopin and Grieg and reflecting the richer chromatic palette of his first two operas *Irmelin* (1892) and *Koanga* (1897). The barcarollike anapest rhythm of its 3/8 meter points towards Delius's later constant use of this device over long harmonic stretches. This Delian feature is to be found in works both lyrical and extrovert, from the tone poem *Over the Hills and Far Away* (1897) to *Eine Messe des Lebens* (1905)--(conclusion of Part I: "Nacht ist es")--to the *Cello Concerto* (1921). The listener will immediately recognize the rhythm in the famous "Serenade" (1920) from the incidental music for *Hassan*, where it is employed from beginning to end.

It is instructive to compare Delius's song with Grieg's setting of the same poem from his *Melodies of the Heart*, op. 5, No. 1, originally set in Danish in 1864, when Grieg was twenty-one, but later published by C.F. Peters, Leipzig, in Henzen's German translation.<sup>10</sup> Delius probably became acquainted with Grieg's German setting of "To brune Øjne" and other of the Norwegian's songs through his friendship with his Solano Grove neighbor, Jutta Belle, an amateur singer who was distantly related to Grieg. He might also have learned much of Grieg's music from Ward, whose repertoire doubtless included the popular *Lyric Pieces*. Delius's piece can easily bear comparison with Grieg's. Grieg's setting is also in G Major, but its mood is more playful and less wistful. Its dancelike "allegretto con grazia," in contrast to Delius's "nicht schnell," supports a straightforward love song without emotional complications. It moves fleetingly towards E Minor (in contrast to Delius's E Major) before returning to G Major and a conventional final cadence. Delius, however, chooses to repeat the words "nein nie und nimmer" with a quiet fadeout (ppp) that would become one of his stylistic trademarks. In its combined harmony and melody, Delius's four-measure ending reveals (with some infelicities in voice-leading) the stylistic feature of the "added sixth chord," a device later overused by both Delius and his imitators.

Throughout his creative life Delius retained his interest in song, and indeed his finest efforts are those works which combine vocal, choral, and orchestral forces. His first hesitating experiments would eventually lead to such masterpieces as *Sea Drift* (1904, to verses of Walt Whitman) and to the work which, in the present author's opinion, is

Delius's finest achievement in song: "An Arabesk" (1911), for baritone solo, chorus, and orchestra, set to a text of the Danish poet Jens Peter Jacobsen. Here Delius's intense chromatic style with its accompanying restless romantic longing reaches perfection in a personal harmonic language braced with new stronger dissonances, perhaps unconsciously assimilated from the impressionists, and even from the European modernists whose music he had scorned. The formal structure is firm. Lyricism and passion are carefully controlled by the German text (in Delius's translation) and by balances of mood and texture. Almost thirty years after his Florida experience, the fifty-year-old composer expressed with intensity and conciseness one of his principal themes: the longing for lost youthful love combined with a heightened sensitivity to the beauty of nature, accepted as benevolent but indifferent to one's own swiftly passing existence. Admittedly, it is a limited message, but in "An Arabesk" the composer presents it with focused artistic vision.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Delius's accomplishment in his finest song had its origin in the brief "Zwei braune Augen" sketched on the banks of the St. Johns River.

<sup>1</sup> Eric Fenby, "On Delius in Florida." Program note from the twenty-fourth Annual Delius Festival, Jacksonville, Florida, March 7-10, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> For a full account of Ward's life, see Don Gillespie, *The Search for Thomas F. Ward, Teacher of Frederick Delius* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Fenby, *Delius As I Knew Him* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1936), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> The authoritative study of the sources of Delius's early music is Robert Threlfall's *Delius' Musical Apprenticeship, Incorporating a Survey of the Leipzig Notebooks* (London: The Delius Trust, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> The song, edited by Robert Threlfall and Allen Percival, appears in *The Complete Works of Frederick Delius*, vol. 18a (London: Stainer & Bell, 1987), pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Heseltine, *Frederick Delius* (London: John Lane, Bodley Head, 1923), p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> In the German translation, the word *dein* has untranslatable nuances. It can denote either the "look" or the girl herself.

<sup>8</sup> Percy Grainger, "The Personality of Frederick Delius," in *A Delius Companion*, ed. Christopher Redwood (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 122. See also letter from Percy Grainger to Richard Muller, October 5, 1941 (Library of Congress).

<sup>9</sup> Lionel Carley, ed., *Delius: A Life in Letters*, I, 1862-1908 (London: Scholar, 1983), pp. 92-94.

<sup>10</sup> Grieg's *Melodies of the Heart* also contains his most famous song "Jeg elsker dig" ("I Love Thee"). Henzen's German version first appeared in 1879 in Peter's *Grieg Album*, vol. III (Edition Peters 466c, pp. 26-27). Writing on December 15, 1884, to Dr. Hans Abraham of C.F.

Peters about the publication of other German versions of his songs (including the famous "Solvejg's Cradle Song"), Grieg expressed his opinion about Wilhelm Henzen, a translator frequently employed by Peters. "[Please use] Mr. Henzen to translate the poems and not a lady, even if she were Sappho herself. Henzen was once a musician and this plays a main role. A translation that's merely good poetically is only a little useful to me, or not at all." See Elsa von Zschinsky-Troxler, ed., *Edvard Grieg, Briefe an die Verleger der Edition Peters 1866-1907* (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1932), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> In Europe "An Arabesk" is usually performed in Philip Heseltine's English translation. To date the author has discovered no evidence of an American performance of either version.