

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Dance to the Music of Time

PENELOPE CAVE

To accompany the recent biography of Violet Gordon Woodhouse we asked Penelope Cave to examine Delius' only harpsichord piece inspired by the flamboyant personality of its dedicatee.

WHEN GEOFFREY EMERSON asked me to play the one and only harpsichord piece by Delius, for the Ryedale Festival, I readily agreed, ordered the score from Boosey and Hawkes and looked forward to meeting this unexpected item in the repertoire.

I recalled the imaginative, romantic and evocative titles: *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, *In a Summer Garden*, *A Song before Sunrise*, *Sea Drift* and *Brigg Fair* and was thus somewhat disappointed when I opened volume 33 of the complete works of Delius (Works for Piano Solo) and read the unimaginative, unromantic title: *Dance for Harpsichord*. Would it evoke either the instrument or a past age? One glance at the score revealed the fulsome dynamic markings and heavy pianistic scoring; no half-hearted pastiche, at any rate, but why? What would have inspired a composer like Delius, in 1919, to write a piece for an instrument in the infancy of its revival? The answer lay above the title, "For Mrs. Violet Gordon Woodhouse". He did not write it for the instrument: he wrote it for the woman.

I immediately set about finding out about this Edwardian lady-harpsichordist whom I remembered from a photograph, pictured in a velvet choker, seated at the large double manual of a 1912 harpsichord by Gaveau of Paris (made under the beady eye of Arnold Dolmetsch); this must have been after her first harpsichord which, according to Mabel Dolmetsch, was "ingeniously evolved through the adaption of an ancient single manual instrument into one with two keyboards and manifold tonal effects." I appealed to Ruth Dyson who immediately produced the chapter on Violet Gordon-Woodhouse from the young Osbert Sitwell's *Noble Essences*. Coincidentally, soon afterwards she was approached by Violet Gordon Woodhouse's great-niece, Jessica Douglas-Home, who was writing the biography which has recently appeared as *Violet: The*

Life and Loves of Violet Gordon Woodhouse published by Harvill. Although not primarily aimed at musicians, this is a very interesting study of an "exquisitely selfish" but charismatic and eloquent keyboard player, living in an unconventional way in the early years of this century, in which the context for the performance of music was within wealthy Edwardian society and where artists of all disciplines met with mutual esteem, hence Osbert Sitwell's book. Violet does, however, seem to have been most unusually fascinating; a personality whose "mesmeric appearance" enchanted all who knew her, male and female, into becoming a "victim of her magnetism" as Jessica Douglas-Home describes one of her adoring and self-abasing friends.

Delius first met Violet Gordon Woodhouse in 1898 when she was known as a pianist and admired by Busoni, Fuller Maitland and Bernard Shaw for her Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and performances of modern Spanish composers. Delius wrote to Jelka, his future wife, that she was "nice, artistic and unpretentious". He continued to contact her whenever in England and after inviting her to



Violet, the first musician to record on the harpsichord, in the recording studio at Hayes in 1920

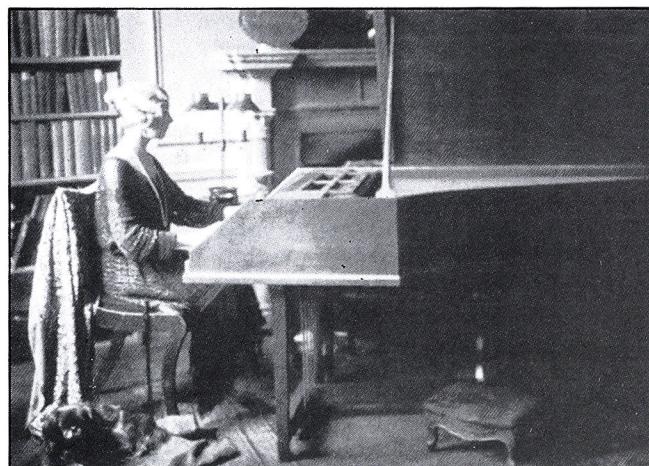
hear his *Dance of Life* performed at the Albert Hall in 1908, by which time she had laid aside the piano for the harpsichord, clavichord and virginals. He wrote home that she looked "as pretty and artistic as ever". During the war, the Deliuses left France for a house near Watford, lent by Beecham. Delius and Jelka saw Violet often, much enjoying her artistic salons where they would meet poets and musicians. Jelka described her admiration for the way she "dressed in harmony with her delicate instruments and her whole person".

Delius presented Violet with the *Dance for Harpsichord* one evening when he went for dinner. Sadly, there appears to be no account of Violet's impressions of the piece and one wonders if she ever played it for him. He must, however, have thought enough of it to agree to its publication, in the first number of the new quarterly, *Music and Letters* the following January (1920) in which was also an article by Violet Gordon Woodhouse on the instruments and their early repertoire but no mention of the Delius. The first and last public performance of the piece to be given by Violet Gordon Woodhouse was not until the 29th March 1927 at the Grotian Hall for her final London concert. Howard Schott in 1971 would not be alone in describing it as "utterly unsuited to the harpsichord" but the reviewer for the Times in 1927 wrote:

This is true harpsichord music, though conceived from the entirely modern point of view, which is interested in what may be called the colour effects of block harmony. Delius's sweet, cloudy harmony, plus the sparkling tone, gave the effect of shot silk, and showed that the harpsichord ought not yet to be regarded as an obsolete instrument whose possibilities have been fully exploited.



Violet with her revered teacher, Rubio, who compared her playing favourably with that of Pablo Casals



Violet in the drawing room at Nether Lypiatt, the house in which she spent the last twenty-five years of her life. She is playing her Dolmetsch harpsichord.

Delius presents us with a somewhat gavotte-like dance to be played "with graceful dance movement, rather quick". It is 55 bars long and in the Boosey & Hawkes edition it takes up one two-page spread. As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of dynamic indications varying from pp to ff with crescendi and decrescendi and the rather puzzling "(Very quietly) Molto tranquillo" printed directly above a forte sign. There are also some fluctuations in tempo markings which lend the piece its graceful air of flexibility, and which typified the playing of Violet Gordon Woodhouse. Ornamentation is sparse but represented by a few



Under Diaghilev's influence European fashion went oriental. Bill Barrington, who spent the last part of the First World War in India, returned with dazzling garments for Violet's already exotic wardrobe.

signs for the mordent (one presumes before the beat, starting on the main note) and the acciaccatura (sometimes they assist in spreading unmanageably wide chords and sometimes they decorate them "as the gentle rain from above"). Of course there are many cases where written-out appoggiatura effects can be found within the ambiguous harmonies of Delius. This piece is indeed technically difficult, because of the size of the chords (with passages of as many as eight notes to a chord) and the necessity for more legato than is always achievable without a sustaining pedal, but it is a challenge for the production of a cantabile despite the difficulties, and a test of

whether one really understands and is tonally in command of one's chosen instrument. Maybe this is the reason why Violet waited eight years before performing it! Certainly she must have felt that her mastery of the clavichord was assured in 1942 when she recorded, for the BBC, her transcription of the overture to Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was fashionable, and perhaps understandable in wartime, that artists were harking back to a golden age but even without this extra pressure, most of the best music of Delius seems to be an attempt to recapture, with a nostalgic longing, that which is past. Between 1915 and 1916, Delius wrote *Four Old English Lyrics*, solo-song settings of Shakespeare, Nashe, Jonson and Herrick and two wordless choral pieces for the Oriana Madrigal Society in 1917, the same year as his orchestral piece, *Eventyr (Once upon a Time)*. He was also at this time attempting to come to terms with the more traditional formal elements of composition, writing the string quartet, violin and 'cello sonatas. The irony is that a performance of the *Dance for Harpsichord* is perhaps as quaint a period piece, today, as the Byrd, Purcell and Scarlatti was to George Bernard Shaw, Lawrence of Arabia, Picasso, Rodin, Rudyard Kipling, Bartok, and Stravinsky, a few amongst the many who attended performances of Violet Gordon Woodhouse in the 1920s.

There is a CD collection (Pavilion Records GEMM CD 9242) of the recordings made by Violet Gordon Woodhouse over 50 years ago, to complement the new biography, from the first ever harpsichord music to be recorded in July 1920 and through the decade, with an excerpt from a BBC interview in 1941 and performances of Bach on the clavichord.

Penelope Cave is a prizewinning harpsichordist, recitalist and recording artist who also teaches the Morley College harpsichord class in London and gives many workshops around the country.