

Delius and the Sound of Place

Few composers have responded as powerfully to place as Frederick Delius (1862–1934). Born in Yorkshire, Delius resided in the United States, Germany, and Scandinavia before settling in France, where he spent the majority of his professional career. This book examines the role of place in selected works, including ‘On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring’, *Appalachia*, and *The Song of the High Hills*, reading place as a creative and historically mediated category in his music. Drawing on archival sources, contemporary art, and literature, and more recent writing in cultural geography and the philosophy of place, this is a new interpretation of Delius’s work, and he emerges as one of the most original and compelling voices in early twentieth-century music. As the popularity of his music grows, this book challenges the idea of Delius as a large-scale rhapsodic composer, and reveals a richer and more productive relationship between place and music.

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Delius and the Sound of Place

DANIEL M. GRIMLEY



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Preface

Where is the place of Delius's music? One of the most compelling figures in early twentieth-century music, and a catalysing influence for a generation of writers and musicians on either side of the First World War, Delius has somehow evaded substantial scholarly scrutiny. Sustained analysis of his major compositions, including *Brigg Fair*, *Sea-Drift*, and *The Song of High Hills*, has been slow to emerge, and, despite enthusiastic advocacy and support, Delius remains a marginal figure on the edge of the musicological canon. One of the primary obstacles to closer engagement with Delius's work has been the thorny question of his musical identity: Delius's biography offers an unusually challenging case study in the symbolism and significance of place. Born in Bradford in 1862 into a family of mercantile German immigrants, Delius spent his formative years in Florida, Scandinavia, and Leipzig, and subsequently resided in Grez-sur-Loing, a small village south of Paris, which became a significant artistic community in the 1890s. After his death in 1934 (in the same year as Elgar and Holst), Delius's body was reinterred at Limpsfield near Oxted on the Kent–Surrey border: a location where he had never actually lived nor where he had any direct family connection (the association was with the Harrison family). The question of place, then, is uneasily imprecise. This monograph draws on recent writing in cultural geography and the philosophy of place, alongside musicological texts, in order to offer a critical reassessment of Delius's music. The aims of the volume are not only to engage at a more sophisticated analytical level than hitherto with Delius's major works, a task which is itself richly rewarding, but also to frame discussion within a broader investigation into the quality and status of place in early twentieth-century music, a reading that challenges straightforward interpretations of Delius as an 'English' composer.

Much scholarship on early twentieth-century music has been intensely concerned with questions of identity, style, and representation. The musical geography of the period, however, remains only patchily understood. Despite energetic attempts in recent years to broaden and diversify such models, seeking to widen the range of geographical reference and promote a more international model of musical exchange in

the European *fin de siècle*, basic questions of musical meaning and place still need to be systematically addressed. Closer examination of Delius's work, furthermore, poses particular challenges of historical interpretation and analytical methodology. His major works – including the opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet* and the Whitman cantata *Sea-Drift* – had a profound impact upon the emergence of a distinctively English musical style after 1900. Critical appreciation of his achievement, however, has been stubbornly unforthcoming in the wider academic field. There is still no authoritative biography of the composer, despite the excellent foundations laid by Lionel Carley's annotated edition of his correspondence. Analytical accounts of Delius's music remain at a preliminary stage. Delius's anniversary year in 2012 prompted renewed interest in his life and works, and the 2016 production of *Koanga* at the Wexford Festival in Ireland offered a welcome chance to reappraise one of his most powerful but neglected works. But there has been little attempt to reflect theoretically upon questions of form and representation in Delius's work, and his music remains a compelling site for developing a more rigorous and nuanced understanding of place, over and above questions of historical biography alone.

One of the primary challenges of Delius's work, in common with much early twentieth-century music (for example, that of Debussy, Mahler, Nielsen, or Sibelius), is that it does not lend itself readily to interpretation with conventional analytical methods. On casual hearing, works such as 'On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring' have frequently tended to perpetuate the image, promulgated widely in his early critical reception, of a rhapsodist whose seemingly indulgent late Romantic harmonic syntax and apparent lack of structural rigour lagged behind more supposedly progressive trends in Continental European music. Constant Lambert, for example, wrote in his famously polemical survey of contemporary composition in 1934, *Music, Ho!*, that 'his greatest admirer could hardly describe Delius as a master of form', and the charge of formlessness has dogged Delius's music ever since. Detailed attention to Delius's major works, however, swiftly suggests a more dynamic and challenging musical voice and a keen sense of musical architecture: Delius's subtle but consistently inventive handling of thematic development and his sophisticated meshing of tonal, chromatic, and modal harmonic systems (for instance, in his chamber music and the late string concertos) demands a correspondingly advanced analytical approach, one sensitively attuned to moments of local thematic and harmonic articulation as well as to broader issues of time and musical subjectivity.

Contemplating Delius's work furthermore challenges our understanding of the relationship between music and place. Significant early performances of his music took place at the Lower Rhine Festival in Germany in the 1890s, and by 1914, on the eve of the First World War, he was widely regarded as one of the most original and progressive voices in English music, even if his work strongly challenges insular notions of an 'English musical style'. All too often, however, the question of place has been associated exclusively with that of national identity. Michael White, for example, published an unpleasantly antagonistic anniversary essay in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2012 under the strapline 'Delius was hardly English at all, and nor is his music', as if citizenship (crudely measured) were reasonable grounds for rejecting a composer's corpus out of hand; finishing this book in the shadow of the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union four years later, it is little comfort to imagine that Delius would never have subscribed to such narrowly dogmatic notions of nationalism himself. Rather, thinking more carefully through the diverse sites and spaces of his compositional development, in the context of contemporary early twentieth-century philosophical writing (for example, through the work of Bergson and Heidegger), indicates a richly complex and ambivalent sense of musical place. Drawing on what Edward Casey calls the 'discursive potentiality' of place, this book argues that Delius's music profoundly recentres our understanding of place, not as a fixed or deterministic category, but rather through a process of flux or 'drift' – one that simultaneously enables us to recontextualise his work within a more genuinely critical framework, and which attends more acutely to issues of agency and presence.

The following discussion is divided into seven chapters. The introduction, 'Place', confronts the problem of place in Delius's critical reception head-on. Contrasting strained attempts to hear his music as intrinsically English with accounts such as Christopher Palmer's influential study *Delius: Portrait of a Cosmopolitan*, it outlines a hermeneutic framework for hearing place in Delius's music, and presents a proof-of-concept study through a brief analysis of one of Delius's most well-known works, the tone poem 'On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring'.

The second and third chapters focus on music inspired by Delius's time in the United States: one of the most vivid but problematic periods in his biography. The second chapter, 'Idyll', is directed toward a discussion of the early *Florida Suite*, written in Leipzig and inspired by Delius's time in the American South. The chapter argues that his encounter with African American music was shaped both by childhood experiences in Yorkshire (watching minstrel shows) and by wider discourses of class and

race. The idea of America as an untouched idyllic space, promulgated in much of the secondary literature, is shown to be a highly partial reading of a much more difficult and contested environment. Similar tensions are explored in the third chapter, 'River', which takes its title not from some of the obvious thematic passages in Delius's works (the breath-taking central sequence from *In a Summer Garden*, or 'To Be Sung of a Summer Night on the Water'), but rather from the final choral sequence in his 'American rhapsody' *Appalachia*, where the river serves as a symbol both of forced absence or removal and of a more sustained temporal continuity. Discussion of *Appalachia* alongside his two American operas, *The Magic Fountain* and *Koanga*, suggests that Delius's response to place in his American works is richer and more ambivalent than has often been assumed. The conjunction of music and place could potentially serve as a transformative site of liberation or release, and not simply colonial fantasy.

The fourth chapter, 'Drift', revolves around a close reading of Delius's 1906 cantata *Sea-Drift*: a setting of the poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Set on Paumanok – the Algonquin name for Long Island – Whitman's text charts an unstable shore, shaped by continual cyclic patterns of erosion and accretion at the very edge of the continent. For Whitman, such edginess serves as a source of poetic intensity, a site of sexual freedom and existential angst. The chapter explores the figure of landscape in Delius's setting as, on the one hand, tracing an agonistic process of self-realisation through loss, and, on the other, suggesting a parallel with historically contemporary writing on coastal morphology. It is here, the chapter concludes, that the complex layered subjectivities of Delius's work can reveal a more decentred sense of time and place.

The following chapter, 'Village', turns to Delius's years at Grez-sur-Loing, an artistic colony south of Paris that became a favourite location for a pioneering international group of post-impressionist painters in the 1890s. The aestheticisation of Grez invites comparison with the village of Combray in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*; like Proust, much of Delius's work is concerned with memory and recollection, and with the sense of place as a fluid, existential process of identification and becoming. Turning to the orchestral rhapsody *Brigg Fair* (1907, essentially an expanded set of variations on the folk tune collected in Lincolnshire the previous year by Percy Grainger), and Delius's operatic setting of Gottfried Keller's 1856 novella *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, however, paints the village in a very different light. As Keller's writing

reveals, the social tensions created by the idea of the village as a more inward-looking and enclosed environment raises sombre issues of exclusion, marginalisation, and ‘wilderness’.

The sixth chapter, ‘Hill’, is devoted to Delius’s Scandinavian works, pre-eminently *The Song of the High Hills*. Conventionally heard (following Beecham and Fenby) as an imaginary account of a walking tour in the Norwegian mountains, *The Song of the High Hills* in fact offers a more nuanced response to ideas of landscape and nature. Moving beyond purely pictorial notions of landscape, discussion instead turns to the music’s complex spiralling formal designs, invoking Henri Bergson’s closely contemporary notion of *durée* as a means of describing its sense of multiple temporality and recurrence.

The final chapter, ‘Garden’, examines the role of gardens as a physical and symbolic presence in Delius’s later music, particularly his Double Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Orchestra. Composed in 1916 for May and Beatrice Harrison, the Concerto’s genesis and shape were powerfully stimulated by the literary and artistic interest in gardening that swept through England in the early years of the century, exemplified by the work of Gertrude Jekyll. Far from offering simply an anodyne escape from the rigours of modern life, gardens emerge in Delius’s music as a more complex and contested site of sexual freedom, nostalgia, and sensory immediacy. This chapter will show how the garden for Delius became a means of negotiating conflicting notions of authorship and identity, a site of resistance and place of consolation and remembrance.

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Abbreviations

GB-Lbl	The British Library
<i>Companion</i>	<i>A Delius Companion</i> , ed. Christopher Redwood (London: John Calder, 1976)
<i>DSJ</i>	<i>The Delius Society Journal</i>
DTA	The Delius Trust Archive
<i>Letters</i>	<i>Delius: A Life in Letters</i> , ed. Lionel Carley, vol. 1: 1862–1908 (London: Scholar Press, 1983); vol. 2: 1909–1934 (London: Scholar Press, 1988, reprinted 1994). The two volumes are referred to as <i>Letters 1</i> and <i>Letters 2</i>
<i>Memories</i>	Clare Delius, <i>Frederick Delius: Memories of My Brother</i> (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1935)

Notes and Nomenclature

References to Delius's work in the text in most cases follow the relevant citations in Robert Threlfall's Catalogue. The completion of a new revised online catalogue of Delius's works, compiled by Joanna Bullivant (available at: www.delius.music.ox.ac.uk/) includes further information about the chronology and provenance of sources. Musical examples follow the Delius Complete Edition, with bar numbers and rehearsal figures consistent with those texts. In the case of the operas (*The Magic Fountain*, *Koanga*, and *A Village Romeo and Juliet*), there is no published full score readily available: rehearsal figures follow those in the vocal scores, which are more accessible for most readers. References to specific pitches follow the Helmholtz system (middle C=c').

The decision to quote from historical sources that use highly offensive and deeply racist language in Chapters 2 and 3 was taken reluctantly and after considerable reflection and discussion with colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic. I have chosen to reprint these passages without redaction both for reasons of scholarly accuracy and, more pressingly, as a necessary attempt to clarify the historical record. My argument is that such discourses of power and domination have frequently been elided, overlooked, or passively condoned in Delius scholarship, and that, even though they are in many ways typical of their time, they are an essential strand of his life and work. This book seeks to acknowledge both the historical violence and trauma such language has caused, and the pain that it continues to cause today.