

ON FIGURING THE FIRST CUCKOO IN SPRING

Derek Schofield looks in detail at the melody and harmony of this popular work.

I may be forgiven the liberty I've taken with the title, but my main aim is to share some of my own findings in making the connection between *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* and the Norwegian folk-tune from which Delius drew inspiration. As I come to this task fresh, having neither read any musicological analysis concerning the work, nor familiarised myself with the reflections and interpretations of others, I may need to ask for further indulgence as all that I might say may well have been said before. I am fortunate in having to hand Gerard Bunk's arrangement of this work, although, to me, it has all the hallmarks of a piano reduction from the orchestral score, and the supplementary piano work from Grieg's Op 66, No 14.

The main reason why I am so enamoured of Delius's music is his use of harmony and the effect to which it is put. But first it will be necessary to comment on the line of this piece (*vis-à-vis* the underlying accompaniment) before proceeding further. It begins properly after Delius, having lifted the curtain on the opening chord, has magically transplanted us into an Arcadian landscape, where we pause momentarily before moving on.

The line in the opening, and partially the closing, section of this work, seems disjointed; it is far from mellifluous but has a skip in the pace, which is constant. Perhaps Delius is taking us on a jaunt to the edge of an enchanted woodland, where we shall give ourselves up entirely to its allure before heading home in the final section. Numbering measures directly after the uptake, the line's angular shape in the first 16 bars, the lack of a sense of smooth passing notes and the complete absence of the note F is, first, going to tell us something about the scale systems available to the composer.

There is an unmistakable pentatonic contour in the opening and closing sections of this work, and closer examination would suggest that, save for a single inflected note of the shortest duration, the complete line is, in fact, a fusion of two such scales, one founded on the tonic of the C major scale and the other on the dominant. In all likelihood, Delius never consciously gave the pentatonic scale a moment's thought; it is more probable that this is where he happened to find himself after simply looking

for, and exploring, interesting chords – a pleasurable activity in its own right, and one in which I've indulged myself on many occasions. This, it seems to me, is a classic example of where Delius has allowed the top line to be at the service of the chord beneath it, rather than the other way around.

The 'melody line' in the bars which follow – and here I'm not hesitant about describing it as such – is quite different and is almost wholly owing to Grieg's melodic working of the Norwegian folk-tune *In Ola Valley, In Ola Lake*. Not counting the uptake, Delius has drawn from only the first eight bars of the Grieg piece to create the central section of his own work. With tonality now in a major scale, smooth passing notes aplenty, and lengthier phrasing, the line is now not only far more lyrical, with a stronger sense of cadence, but each of the four phrases which comprise it seem so conveniently structured as to allow the composer to 'cut and paste' or repeat them as he chooses. Only once does Delius quote the folk-tune *in toto* and without interruption, and that is as a prelude to the cuckoo's final calling. (There is an interesting curiosity here, and I think it worth recounting. If one happens to be already well acquainted with *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* and comes to the opening of *In Ola Valley...* for the first time, it seems to be strangely displaced; it seems to lack a 'questioning' phrase. This is because the uppermost line of the perfect (V-I) cadence falls to the tonic and has the feel of an 'answering' phrase. Delius, therefore, was skilfully able to dovetail this into bars 15-17, which both comfortably 'signs off' the phrase in bar 17 and bridges the first section to the second. We shall return to this phrase presently.)

All this is in marked contrast to what we were presented with earlier, where each phrase is so short as to be not much larger than the *motif* it embodies. Nevertheless, it is at this early stage where we, perhaps, begin to fathom some of Delius's methodology. Is he, one wonders, already presaging the arrival of the cuckoo with those small rhythmical figures, ie the weak 'up' and strong 'down' beat(s) which follow on, one from another, and run almost the entire length of the first section? Possibly, and it's certainly the way I feel it to be. But in using verbal language and/or the symbols and notational devices within the manuscript to comment on the language of music, we are entering the murky world of meta-linguistics. It is a difficult area, not least because one man's perception and interpretation is not necessarily that of another. Ask any music student what he or she is experiencing in the following experiment:

With the root F and middle C a fifth apart and F and A following immediately above, strike the chord of F major and ask him or her to 'describe' it, or to tell you something about it (other than it is a major chord) or if it gives rise to a particular thought. Then, after flattening the A, pose the same questions. Thirdly, keeping F in the bass with B, D sharp and G sharp following immediately above, strike the (enharmonic) half-diminished seventh chord and ask how it compares with the other two.

The student's answer is almost certainly bound to be at variance with my own. The best I could come up with is that F major is audibly 'affirmative' if not much more than a positive statement, and F minor negative, with more than a hint of melancholy. Most interesting of all, however, is the third chord, which seems to me to be neither positive nor negative in its message but, rather, a chord of deep introspection, of repressed mood perhaps, among other interpretations. In short, harmony contextualises what we hear and its effects are limitless. We can all agree it is the creator of mood, certainly of a sense of anticipation and suspension, and even the illusion of space. But, most uncannily of all, harmony has the property of allowing itself to mean what we *want* it to mean – the stuff of reviewers, sleeve-writers and commentators, myself included.

Just consider for a moment the opening bars of each of these works. Could it not be reasonably maintained that Delius's open-ended C major seventh – the first chord we hear, with its unresolved harmony implying distended movement towards a point of consonance – together with the unstable note B, have the effect of leaving the listener *somewhere* within the 'open space' of the countryside? I wonder, too, how it is in Grieg's setting of the lake that dyads of syncopated perfect fifths alternating at the octave are able to conjure a presence at the water's edge. Is it that the octave implies depth – perhaps, unknowingly, our first association with water (even concern) over and above the aesthetic – and its mysteriousness down to the lack of a determinate major or minor third – a hollowness as it has been described? Or is it the 'plunging' of the fifth? Who knows what tricks the musical mind plays on each of us, and not necessarily the same trick!

As far as one can tell, syncopation was the only other main idea Delius took over from the Grieg work, and specifically in the dyadic form Grieg presented it. It first emerges in the bass line of bars 8-10 and is easily noticeable after the uncomplicated G major chord brings the first half of the first section to a brief close. It next emerges *pianissimo* when we get the first

hearing of the cuckoo; next where the music broadens a little and, finally, just after the bird has made its very last appearance.

As we now begin to explore the harmony element, and our eyes turning once more to Bunk's opening page, we are struck by the wholesale block-chord writing running the whole length of the first section – 68 independent chords to service 73 notes! Were it not for the fact that the chords exhibited here are far more full-bodied and 'advanced', this kind of homophonic writing could easily disguise itself between the pages of a Victorian hymnal. At first it seems somewhat arresting to have every weak beat underwritten with chords supporting both harmony and non-harmony notes, but is perfectly commensurate with the 'spring in the step' I indicated earlier; it would have been decidedly easier to smoothen the line with harmonies limited only to the strong beats, but nothing like as efficacious.

It is clear from an overview of the entire work and from the increasing density of accidentals which abound, that a detailed analysis of Delius's harmony is beyond the capacity of all but the undaunted pedant. Nevertheless, we are able to make some general observations. We could note, for instance, that the chord of the major seventh claims about 34% of the harmonic interest in the first 13 bars – an indication that the jazz medium, although not having properly claimed its birth-right at the time, was certainly well into the nascent stage of its development by 1912 – or remark that of the total number of chords struck throughout the entire work, roughly 86% were other than those of the straight major or minor variety, or their inversions. Moreover, with so many chromatic inflections, Delius is able to move through key areas with such rapidity that the key hardly has time to establish itself, and there's always a good chance that he'll surprise the listener at the cadence, not to say confront the ear with some harmonic ambiguity. This is evident early on when we reach the chord of G major in bar eight and our harmonic sense equivocates between a conventional move to the dominant (which it is, though with chromatic fogging *en route*) and/or an abrupt move into the key of G major, only to be quitted immediately without there ever being a modular F sharp on the horizon – and where, incidentally, I find it difficult at to stop my 'harmonic ear' from making a tangential switch into a flattened key with a progression of, say, B flat major seventh to E flat major seventh.

We have another couple of examples further on after Delius's flirtation

with F sharp minor when, at the end of the phrase our ears, expecting to take us from C sharp dominant seventh to F sharp minor, are instead met with an inversion of A dominant seventh; and two bars further still when, in expectation of a move from I (C major) to IV (F major), we end up making a chordal progression from C to D ninth. The other cadence worth remarking comes at the end of the 'bridge phrase' to which I said we'd return earlier. But first I think the harmonic content of the bridge itself is worth examining.

In its simplest form the whole phrase could have been sustained on a single tonic pedal point or, quite sufficiently, with alternating dominant seventh and tonic chords. But just look at Delius's full harmonic declension of this phrase! A thirteenth – D ninth – G dominant seventh – F sharp dominant seventh – B minor seventh – E major – E flat augmented ninth – D retarded augmented fourth. I have a great urge at this point to quip, why use two chords when eight will do! It is meant light-heartedly but nevertheless makes the point, and tells us something about the Delian style where words might fail. The penultimate chord is typical of the clashing nuance Delius often employs, but works well in context of the whole phrase, where the ear, in picking up on the final cadence, is made to feel it is *stepping down* into the key of D major, instead of approaching it laterally.

As to the overall effect of this work, I think it lies in the totality of what we hear, and for that we have to leave the page. We are not only consumers of sound but, in this particular case, Delius makes us feel we have a syntonic presence within it, somewhere between the terrestrial dyadic pedal points in the bass line and the ethereal reach of the first violins; we are as solitary *monads* fully integrated within the grand scheme of nature, a part of the enormity of it all.

For all that, no amount of 'understanding' is necessary to enjoy *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*; it is wonderful music to be enjoyed for its own sake, and will stand the test of time. It only matters to people like me who delight in looking closer to see what lies behind it all, to see how it is done, to see how it works and, above all, to discover what makes a great work of art 'great'. But no matter what tools may be in the shed, and assembly manuals to hand, it will always take a master of his craft to put it all together.

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