

The Delius Society Concert

Choral Arts Philadelphia

Matthew Glandorf, Artistic Director and conductor

with

Mark Livshits, piano

Nancy Bean and Davyd Booth, violins

Meng Wang, viola Lloyd Smith, cello Anne Peterson, bass

Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Serenade to Music" holds a special place in the choral repertoire. It was commissioned by Henry Wood. Vaughan Williams knew that the work would only be performed again if he allowed for varying forces to play it. He made an arrangement for choir and orchestra — heard here adapted for a string quintet and piano — and also an arrangement for orchestra alone.

Vaughan Williams chose the Belmont scene from the opening of the last act of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." The text is inherently musical and the sounds of the words translate readily into orchestral colors. Immediately accessible, the music is all about colors. Indeed, in "The Merchant of Venice," this is an unusual moment of repose and reflection, praising the calming effects of music. Vaughan Williams extracted from the scene only those lines that embraced the very essence of music in our lives. What a wonder — that these words, written over 400 years ago and set to music over sixty years ago, are as fresh and meaningful today as they were for the bard, as well as for the grandfather of 20th century English music.

Frederick Delius' Three Piano Preludes represent the finest of Delius' solo piano music. They are fluid, quixotic, fleeting apparitions (none lasts longer than two minutes) whose beguiling harmonies are very much in the manner of Debussy.

The first Prelude, marked "Scherzando," has an enchanting lilt to it, and its harmonies are fashioned from the whole-tone scale. The second is marked "Quick" and has right-hand figurations of broken fourths decorating a sweeping melody. The third is marked "With lively undulating movement." It makes great play of the whole-tone scale (Debussy is not far away). The ending is another beautiful example of how Delius lets the music float away into the distance. These three pieces, though they may appear slight on the page, are subtle, and richly rewarding to play and hear.

Sir Charles Hubert Parry's motet, Lord, let me know mine end is one of eight from "Songs of Farewell," a deeply moving codicil that divulges his acute inner loneliness and spiritual unorthodoxy.

Parry drew his text for this motet from Psalm 39, which dwells on the transitory nature of life and man's vanity. The ambitious canvas, set for double choir, maintains variety with masterly manipulation of counterpoint, homophony and antiphonal exchange.

The most emotional utterances appear at the end of the work. Surely most central to Parry's whole spiritual philosophy are the lines "For I am a stranger with Thee and a sojourner"; but still more profoundly moving is the hushed tranquility of the final supplication, "O spare me a little before I go hence."

The concert concludes with one of Delius' major works, "Songs of Sunset." It is a setting of poems written by Ernest Christopher Dowson. Dowson was a *fin-de-siècle* poet and novelist associated with the Aesthetic and Decadent Movements of the 1880's and '90's.

"Songs of Sunset" marks a high point of inspiration for Delius. He had been writing large-scale concert works such as "Appalachia," "Sea Drift," and "A Mass of Life" around this time and was obviously fired up by Dowson's text. It certainly fulfils just about every criterion for the composer in terms of his personal world-view: all his philosophical *raisons d'être* are here, ranging from the poignancy of Man's transient existence on earth compared with Nature's eternal renewal, to the austere belief that we come from nothing and return to nothing.

Delius set a group of eight poems by Dowson, not separated into movements as such, but into self-contained sections as if to emphasize the work's structural and emotional unity. The orchestral accompaniment has been adapted for string quintet and piano for this concert.

"Songs of Sunset" is a beautiful work which celebrates the end of days, and the end of earthly life.