

The writing of Frederick Delius's opera

The Magic Fountain

By Edward Beazley

Abstract

The Magic Fountain was the second of six operas that Frederick Delius wrote, but during his lifetime, only three were performed. Originally written during the 1890's, *The Magic Fountain* did not receive its first performance until 1977, 43 years after Delius's death. To date there have been three separate productions of the work which collectively has resulted in just 13 complete performances of the opera.

This dissertation takes a detailed look at the writing of *The Magic Fountain*, which until now has received little attention by way of commentary and research. There is sparse detail which is readily available about the opera, and what does exist, has not been covered to the extent or depth discussed in this dissertation. Part one provides a detailed history about Delius's writing of *The Magic Fountain*. It looks at the circumstances and influences on Delius during this relatively early stage of his composing life. There is a discussion about factors which may have influenced Delius's choice of subject, plus attempts which were made to both stage the opera and publish a copy of the score. Part two looks at the influences which are demonstrated both in terms of the libretto and music of *The Magic Fountain*. Like many operatic composers from this period, Delius was influenced by Wagner and demonstrates this

through his own use of leitmotifs and a 'Liebestod' ending. There are also examples which show Delius re-using his own music in *The Magic Fountain* from earlier works as well as music which he takes from *The Magic Fountain* and uses in later compositions.

Introduction

Looking at the canon of Delius's larger scale choral based works, most commentators discuss his more well known or critically acclaimed compositions, such as *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (1897-1901), *Sea Drift* (1903-4), *A Mass of Life* (1904-5) and *Requiem* (1913-16).

Delius wrote *The Magic Fountain* at a relatively early stage in his career, whilst still developing his style and craft as a composer, but very little research appears to have been carried out about the opera. There are a small number of biographers who have written about Delius's life, and within those biographies *The Magic Fountain* receives very sparse attention. The fact that there was no single source of authoritative information made this an appealing subject to research. The drawback was, that with such a small pool of literary sources, it sometimes became difficult to find sufficient information from which to draw, discuss and develop an argument. During the writing of this dissertation, no evidence has been found to suggest that any previous attempt has been made to research *The Magic Fountain* to the extent that this dissertation addresses.

Considering the lack of source literature, it was sometimes difficult to ascertain the truth about certain facts which are purported to have taken place. This includes whether there had been plans to stage a production of *The Magic Fountain* at Weimar. It also appears that amongst the small number of Delian experts, their own views have changed over time, as knowledge about Delius, his life and music develop. Finding information about *The Magic Fountain* became a jigsaw puzzle, firstly in an attempt to understand events which had taken place, and then to collate these findings in a logical manner, from the variety of disparate sources.

Procuring a copy of the score from the publishers Boosey & Hawkes, they informed that a copy of the completed works full score had not been sold within the past three years. Upon receipt, it was clear that this was a conductors' score rather than a study size publication, making it difficult to evaluate whether this was a fair reflection of the interest in the work. However, given that *The Magic Fountain* has only received 13 complete performances, this would appear to bear testament to the relative obscurity of this opera.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore *The Magic Fountain* in detail, to provide an insight into an opera which to date, has received a negligible amount of attention and research.