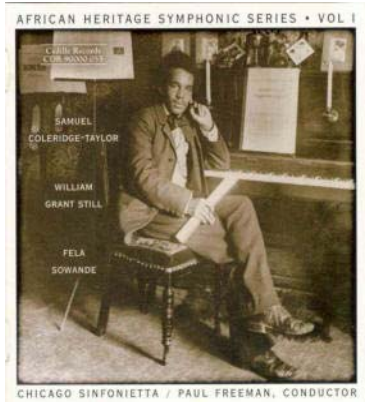


# Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Afro-British Composer, Conductor & Professor



## 1 Birth

The British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born on August 15, 1875 in Croydon, a suburb of London, England. His mother was an English woman named Alice Hare. His father was Daniel Peter Taylor, a native of Sierra Leone.

## 2 Father

Daniel Taylor trained as a physician at King's College, London. After graduating he found his race was a barrier to maintaining a medical practice in the United Kingdom. As a result he returned to Africa permanently around the time of Samuel's birth. Jeffrey Green has published an article in *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, entitled "The Foremost Musician of His Race: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor of England, 1875-1912". It says of Samuel:

He had no known links with Dr. Taylor, who moved from Sierra Leone and the bustling port of Freetown to the colonial backwater of the Gambia, where he died in 1904.

## 3 Youth

Young Samuel was raised by his English mother and stepfather, but his musical education was overseen by Col. Herbert A. Walters, who belonged to the church choir in which the boy sang. Samuel also studied violin with a local musician as a child.

## 4 Education

When the time came for college, Walters obtained an admission interview for Samuel at the Royal College of Music. That led to his enrollment as a violin student in 1890. Two years later he switched to composition and was taught by Charles Villiers Stanford. He had works performed in public while still a student at the college.

## 5 Pan-Africanism

Very early on the composer began collaborating with the African American poet and author Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906). Writing in *Africana Encyclopedia*, Roanne Edwards says of Coleridge-Taylor:

He was also a leading exponent of Pan-Africanism, which emphasized the importance of a shared African heritage as the touchstone of black cultural identity.

## 6 *Ballade in A Minor*

Coleridge-Taylor rose to prominence in 1898, the year he turned 23, on the strength of two works. The first was his *Ballade in A Minor*. It was commissioned for the prestigious annual Three Choirs Festival at the suggestion of the British composer Edward Elgar (1857-1934). The piece was a critical and popular success.

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## 7 *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*

Coleridge-Taylor's second major composition of 1898 was his musical *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, for which he is best known. The work is a setting of verses from *Song of Hiawatha* by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He conducted its premier to great acclaim. The work was staged hundreds of times in the United Kingdom alone during the next 15 years.

## 8 Marriage

Coleridge-Taylor married Jessie Walmisley on Dec. 30, 1899. She was a pianist and a classmate of his at the Royal College of Music, where they met.

## 9 *24 Negro Melodies*

The composer credited the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their European tours with introducing him to African American spirituals. He also collected traditional songs of Africans and African Americans from other sources for the work which became his *24 Negro Melodies, Op. 59 (76:48)*. Pianist Frances Walker has recorded it on Orion 7806 2 (1995). The CD was later re-released as Orion 83105 (2006) by Marquis Classics Distribution. Coleridge-Taylor wrote program notes for the composition which read, in part, as follows:

What Brahms has done for the Hungarian folk music, Dvorak for the Bohemian, and Grieg for the Norwegian, I have tried to do for these Negro Melodies. The plan adopted has been almost without exception that of the Tema con Variazioni [Theme with Variations].

## 10 Conductor

Along with conducting performances of his own large body of music, Coleridge-Taylor frequently appeared as conductor for the works of others. He held a permanent conducting position with the Handel Society of London from 1904 until his death.

## 11 Teaching

Coleridge-Taylor took on more and more teaching positions throughout his career, beginning in 1895. At the time of his death he was a Lecturer at Croydon Conservatoire, and Professor of Composition at Trinity College of Music, Crystal Palace School of Art and Music, and Guildhall School of Music.

## 12 North America

The publicity surrounding *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* created a huge demand for tours both within the United Kingdom and abroad. Among the most important for the composer's career were three tours of North America in 1904, 1906 and 1910.

## 13 1904 Tour

The first concert of the 1904 tour was in Washington, D.C. The Coleridge-Taylor Society, an African American choir, appeared with the United States Marine Band, with the composer at the podium. During his stay in the capital Coleridge-Taylor visited President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House.

## 14 1906 Tour

Jeffrey Green describes the 1906 tour in his article:

In the 1906 tour the Briton presented the *Atonement*, the *Quadroon Girl*, and *Hiawatha*; he also toured with Burleigh. He appeared in Toronto, St. Louis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee, as well as the cities of Boston, Washington and Chicago, which had also been on his first tour schedule.

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## 15 1910 Tour

Green writes of the 1910 tour:

In May and June 1910 he made his third and last visit to America. Boston, Detroit, New York, and Connecticut were on his schedule. He was the guest conductor at the Litchfield County Choral Union Festival at Norfolk, Connecticut. Such was his fame that just two racist whites withdrew from what they perceived as the humiliation of working under a black.

## 16 Death

On September 1, 1912 Samuel Coleridge-Taylor died of pneumonia complicated by exhaustion from overwork. He was just 37 years old. Although he took on an excessive work load of composing, conducting and teaching, he still had difficulty supporting his family. When he published a work of music he received only a small one-time payment from the publisher. The circumstances of his death contributed greatly to the subsequent adoption of a system of royalties for composers in the U.K.

## 17 Legacy

Coleridge-Taylor left a large and varied body of music, both vocal and instrumental. His daughter Avril and son Hiawatha later earned degrees from the Guildhall School of Music. Both had careers in the U.K. as classical composers. Avril was also a conductor and pianist. Jeffrey Green writes of the legacy the composer left for musicians of African descent:

By including African, Afro-American, and Afro-Caribbean elements in his compositions in melody and in title, as well as by being visibly and proudly of African descent, the music and the achievements of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor had made black concert musicians proud and able to walk tall, especially in America where the compositions of European masters dominated in concert hall programs.

## 18 *The Hiawatha Man*

A major recent biography is *The Hiawatha Man*, by Geoffrey Self. It was published in 1995 by Scholar Press. Biographies have also been written by the composer's wife Jessie and daughter Avril.

## Audio Samples:

AFKA SK 543 (1998); *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: Chamber Music*; The Coleridge Ensemble; *Five Negro Melodies for Piano Trio Op. 59, No. 1*:

[Sometimes I feel like a motherless child](#)