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Celebrating Legacy and Unity: The Enduring Influence of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*

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Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who passed away prematurely at age thirty-seven, left behind nearly one hundred works for voice and instruments, with *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* standing out as one of his most celebrated compositions. As a mixed-race composer of English and Sierra Leonean descent, he was both celebrated and challenged during his lifetime. In the United States, African American communities embraced Coleridge-Taylor, viewing him as a powerful symbol of Black excellence in the classical music world. Despite facing racial prejudice, he achieved prominence in classical music, as evidenced by his vast output and fame during a time when the field was largely dominated by white compos-

ers. During his three visits to the United States, he was warmly received, even meeting President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House—an unusual honor for a Black artist at the time. His legacy endures as a composer who broke racial barriers and inspired future generations of Black musicians.

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast premiered in 1898 to immediate international acclaim, earning praise from the leading composers and critics of the era. Coleridge-Taylor's success was grounded in his distinctive musical voice, which synthesized rich European harmonies with rhythmic elements reflective of his own diverse cultural background. This unique blend made him a prominent figure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Composition and Premiere of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast and its companion works, *The Death of Minnehaha*, *Hiawatha's Departure*, and "Overture to the Song of Hiawatha" make the complete *Scenes from The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Op. 30. These works were composed by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor between 1898 and 1900. Coleridge-Taylor gained recognition after a successful performance of his works at the 1898 Three Choirs Festival, around the time he was commissioned to compose *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. This opportunity came through the recommendation of Sir Edward Elgar, who deeply admired his work. Coleridge-Taylor did not take long to complete the score, and it was published ahead of its premiere on November 11, 1898, at his alma mater, The Royal College of Music. His mentor, Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, conducted the premiere performance to an enthusiastic audience. In October 1912, Sir Hubert Parry later described the first performance, writing in the *Musical Times*:

It had got abroad in some unaccountable and mysterious manner that something of unusual interest was going to happen... Expectation was not disappointed, and *Hiawatha* started on a career [which] established it as one of the the most universally beloved works of modern English music.¹

Within months of its premiere in London, it received its American premiere by the Temple Choir of Brooklyn, New York. It was then performed across the globe, including performances in South Africa and New Zealand.² In England, performances became so frequent that it is said to have rivaled the acclaim of Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.³ In the decades following its premiere, the complete *Song of Hiawatha* was staged annually at Royal Albert Hall replete with staging and costume. The first staged performance was conducted by Samuel's son, Hiawatha Coleridge-Taylor, in 1924. The Museum of Music History's website includes photos from selected performances, noting: "For fourteen years between 1924 and 1939 this spectacular production of Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha* was

an essential attraction of the London summer season."⁴

It is important to note that while the work received international acclaim, Coleridge-Taylor did not receive significant financial gain from the composition. The young composer sold his rights to the work for fifteen guineas—a modest fee for such a magnificent work.⁵ He received no royalties for performances or copies purchased, and his financial outlook did not improve during that period as one would have thought. This led to a period of significant overworking, which is believed to have contributed to the pneumonia that led to his death in 1912.

The Literary Foundation: Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* served as the libretto for *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, providing the narrative framework and poetic imagery that Coleridge-Taylor masterfully set to music. Published in 1855, Longfellow's poem, written in a distinctive trochaic tetrameter,⁶ was heavily inspired by the rhythms of Finnish epic poetry, particularly the *Kalevala*, a nineteenth-century epic compiled by Elias Lönnrot from Karelian and Finnish folklore.⁷ The section of the poem selected for Coleridge-Taylor's cantata is drawn from Canto XI, a passage that vividly recounts the joyous wedding of Hiawatha and Minnehaha in a rich, picturesque setting.

The Song of Hiawatha is an epic poem inspired by Indigenous American legends, particularly those of the Ojibwe people.⁸ It recounts the life and deeds of Hiawatha, a legendary hero known for his wisdom and strength, and his union with Minnehaha, a maiden of the Dacotah people.⁹ Longfellow sought to capture the grandeur and mysticism of Indigenous storytelling through a distinctly Western literary lens. Trochaic tetrameter, with its rolling, chant-like rhythm, mirrors the cadence of oral storytelling. The structure does not lend itself to musical adaptation. However, Coleridge-Taylor used the text to create a fluid and dynamic setting. Longfellow divided the poem into multiple cantos, each depicting different aspects of Hiawatha's life. *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* vividly portrays the joy and grandeur of the festivities through rich descriptions of na-



ture, music, and communal celebration.

The text presents four key thematic elements for readers to explore. First and foremost is the beauty of nature in Longfellow's writing. The passage selected for the cantata is rich in imagery, vividly depicting rivers, forests, and wildlife as integral to the celebratory scene.

Then along the sandy margin
Of the lake, the Big-Sea-Water,
On he sped with frenzied gestures,
Stamped upon the sand, and tossed it
Wildly in the air around him;
Till the wind became a whirlwind,
Till the sand was blown and sifted
Like great snowdrifts o'er the landscape,
Heaping all the shores with Sand Dunes,
Sand Hills of the Nagow Wudjoo!

Longfellow's vivid descriptions harmonize the people with their environment, allowing listeners to visualize the landscape as the music unfolds.

Of note is the theme of communal celebration. Hiawatha and Minnehaha's wedding feast is not merely a personal milestone but a shared experience for the entire village. Longfellow immediately sets the scene with a rhythmic, chant-like passage:

You shall hear how Pau-Puk-Keewis,
How the handsome Yenadizze
Danced at Hiawatha's wedding;
How the gentle Chibiabos,
He the sweetest of musicians,
Sang his songs of love and longing;
How Iagoo, the great boaster,
He the marvellous story-teller,
Told his tales of strange adventure,
That the feast might be more joyous,
That the time might pass more gayly,
And the guests be more contented.

Longfellow illustrates the gathering of people, their feasting, and their songs, emphasizing the significance of unity and collective joy.

Music and storytelling emerge as central themes in the poem, with storytelling serving as a fundamental aspect of the human experience. It fosters connection, preserves history, and provides a means of sharing cultural identity—particularly in indigenous traditions, where oral narratives play a vital role in passing down knowledge and heritage. The wedding festivities are infused with references to “the flute's wild music” and the rhythmic energy of dancing. Longfellow highlights song and storytelling as vital traditions for preserving cultural memory—an idea that Coleridge-Taylor echoes through his intricate orchestration and interplay between voices and instruments.

Finally, at its core, the text celebrates love and unity. Hiawatha and Minnehaha's marriage represents their personal bond and the union of different tribes, symbolizing peace and harmony. This theme resonated deeply in an era when discussions of cultural unity and division were at the forefront, making the work both timely and timeless. Among the most passionate moments in the text is the aria, “Onaway! Awake, Beloved,” in which their love is described in the following way:

And the gentle Chibiabos
Sang in accents sweet and tender,
Sang in tones of deep emotion
Songs of love and songs of longing;
Looking still at Hiawatha,
Looking at fair Laughing Water,
Sang he softly, sang in this wise:
“Onaway! Awake, beloved!
Thou the wild-flower of the forest!
Thou the wild-bird of the prairie!
Thou with eyes so soft and fawn-like!
“If thou only lookest at me,
I am happy, I am happy,
As the lilies of the prairie,
When they feel the dew upon them!



Modern Critique

Although *The Song of Hiawatha* was immensely popular in the nineteenth century, it has since been critiqued by some for its romanticized depiction of Indigenous American culture. Longfellow, writing from a Eurocentric perspective, crafted a narrative that blended indigenous legends with his own poetic imagination, often simplifying or altering elements to fit his artistic vision. While his intent was to celebrate Indigenous American traditions, the result was a work that, while beautifully written, did not always reflect authentic indigenous perspectives. As a composer of African descent working within the European classical tradition, Coleridge-Taylor saw *The Song of Hiawatha* not as a literal historical account but as a vehicle for artistic expression. His ability to transform the text into a universal celebration of love and community reflects his broader goal of bridging cultural identities through music. His setting does not attempt to recreate indigenous music but instead interprets Longfellow's words through the lens of Western classical tradition. By doing so, he created a work that transcended cultural boundaries, offering a universal expression of joy, love, and community.

As perspectives on colonial-era literature have evolved, so too has the conversation surrounding Longfellow's text. Today, there is a greater awareness of the need to contextualize Longfellow's portrayal of Indigenous American culture.¹⁰ While the poem remains a significant literary work, modern scholarship acknowledges its limitations and the ways in which it reflects nineteenth-century attitudes rather than authentic indigenous narratives.¹¹ This shift should not be viewed as a critique or a reason to avoid performing the work but rather as an invitation to engage in informed discussions about the text. Such conversations as part of the preparation process can enrich the performance and foster a deeper understanding of the work's complexities.

Musical Interpretation: Coleridge-Taylor's Artistic Vision

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast is scored for SATB chorus (with divisi), tenor soloist, and orchestra. Coleridge-Taylor enhances Longfellow's text through his choral writing, using the collective voice of the choir to amplify

the festive atmosphere. The work is composed in nine sections, each providing a different tonal soundscape and mood. Eight of the sections are composed for chorus. However, nestled in the sections is a standalone aria, "Onaway! Awake, Beloved," scored for tenor soloist. Its orchestration requires the full complement of instruments, which provide a rich sonic texture that enhances the work's vivid storytelling.

In the opening section, the strings are often employed to create lush, sweeping lines that evoke the beauty of the natural setting (Figure 1 on the next page). The brass section, especially in moments of heightened drama or celebration, provides powerful and bold statements, underscoring the grandeur of the event. The woodwinds are used to add color and intimacy to the work, particularly in passages involving the solo tenor, whose aria is supported by a delicate woodwind background. In addition, the percussion section, including the use of cymbals and timpani, adds rhythmic drive and excitement to sections of communal action or festive celebration.

Through his orchestration, Coleridge-Taylor creates a dynamic interplay between the vocal and instrumental forces. The orchestra often sets the emotional tone for the vocal passages, and at times, it takes on a more prominent role, using thematic material to highlight the narrative elements. The careful balance of orchestral color with the voices ensures that the work remains rich and immersive, whether in moments of quiet reflection or exuberant celebration. Even in its more intimate or subdued moments, the overall feeling of celebration is present throughout the vocal and instrumental writing.

The melodies in *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* are among the many distinctive features of the work, with Coleridge-Taylor's expansive, lyrical writing allowing the chorus and soloist to shine. From the opening fifths in the woodwinds that then are heard in the chorus, the vocal lines are thoughtful and endearing. The tenor aria stands out as the most iconic melodic passage, featuring soaring phrases and sustained lines that evoke the grandeur of the ceremony while also expressing the intimate emotions of the bride and groom. The melody reflects the meaning of the text with sustained notes underscoring the urgency and passion in the singer's plea. This aria, like many of the work's melodies, reveals Coleridge-Taylor's ability to balance dramatic intensity with lyricism, adding to the



memorability of the work (Figure 2 on the next page).

In addition to the tenor aria, Coleridge-Taylor's vocal lines for the chorus are meticulously constructed to balance individual expression with ensemble cohesion. He employs both homophonic textures and contrapuntal passages. These contrasting techniques allow for a variety of expressive possibilities, enhancing the emotional depth of the piece. The choral sections, particularly those depicting the wedding feast, use rich harmonies with overlapping vocal entrances, creating a sense of community and collective joy. The vocal writing

showcases the composer's fluency in handling complex choral textures while ensuring that the text remains clear and intelligible to the listener.

Rhythm plays a central role in creating the vitality and movement of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. The rhythmic structure varies throughout the cantata, with some sections featuring stately, processional rhythms and others employing more fluid patterns. Influenced by both European classical traditions and the rhythmic characteristics of African music—an aspect significant due to Coleridge-Taylor's mixed heritage—the work incor-

The musical score for measures 19-25 of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* is presented for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. Measures 19-25 show a transition from a forte (f) section to a dimando (dim.) section. The Violin I and II parts feature triplets and slurs. The Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass parts provide harmonic support with sustained notes and rhythmic patterns. The score is in G major and 4/4 time.

Figure 1. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, mm. 19–25.
Public domain.



Andante con moto $\text{♩} = 120$

601 *pp* tranquillo

605 *rall.* Tenor Solo "On - a -

609 *a tempo* *f* way! A - wake _____ be - lov - ed! _____ Thou the wild-flow'r of the for - est! _____

a tempo *pp* *p*

613 Thou _____ the wild - bird of the prai - rie! _____ Thou with eyes so soft and

Figure 2. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Hiawatha's Feast*, mm. 601–615.
Onaway! Awake, Beloved (aria) opening. Public domain.



porates both regular, march-like beats in the opening sections and more syncopated rhythms as the narrative develops. These rhythmic shifts contribute to the celebratory nature of the work, mirroring the excitement and communal energy of the wedding feast, especially in the choral sections where the rhythmic drive increases to heighten the event's grandeur.

Furthermore, Coleridge-Taylor introduces moments of varying meters that add a fluid, expressive quality to the music. These shifts often occur during intimate, emotional moments, such as the solo sections, where the flexibility of rhythm mirrors the deep emotional currents of the text. This rhythmic diversity enhances the emotional range of the work, moving seamlessly from collective celebration to more introspective, heartfelt expressions.

The harmonic language of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* reflects the rich, chromatic style typical of the late-Romantic era, supporting the expressive nature of the text. Coleridge-Taylor uses tonal harmony but frequently shifts between keys and modulates to evoke emotional movement and depth. While the piece primarily employs major keys that reflect the celebratory nature of the wedding feast, the composer introduces minor modes to convey moments of introspection, yearning, or sadness. These subtle harmonic shifts serve as a musical reflection of the changing emotional landscape of the narrative. For instance, the transitions from light-hearted celebration to deeper emotional moments are underscored by shifts in tonality, enhancing the work's narrative complexity. This can be heard in the opening of the cantata, composed in D major as the excitement of the wedding celebration where the cuisine is described in colorful language. The first considerable change in mood takes place at rehearsal 13, where the tenors and basses introduce the post feast activities and engage the chef Nokomis, in a playful B^b major (Figure 3 on the next page).

Throughout the work, Coleridge-Taylor subtly shifts to related minor keys to deepen the emotional resonance of the text. These modulations often occur at pivotal points in the narrative, highlighting transitions from external celebration to more personal, introspective moments. Among the intimate moments of the work are when the chorus sings about Chibiabos, a "friend of Hiawatha," asking for a song of love on

longing. This section, from rehearsal 41 to 45, leads into the tenor aria, which is woven into the storyline (Figure 4 on page 23). The lush, chromatic chords move beyond conventional tonality, embracing more expansive harmonic territories and creating a sense of harmonic richness that complements the multifaceted narrative of the work.

Revival and Modern Performances

Although *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* is not in frequent performance rotation today, several notable performances have taken place in recent years. Centennial celebrations of the work in 1998 began a revival of renewed interest. Of important note are performances of the work in Boston, home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 2017, the Colour of Music Festival, under the leadership of founder and artistic director Lee Pringle, presented the work with conductor Kzaem Abdullah. In 2023, Dr. Zanaida Robles, a respected Coleridge-Taylor scholar, led the National Concerts Chorus & Orchestra in a landmark performance at Carnegie Hall—the first time the work had been heard on that prestigious stage in over a century. In 2024 the Carroll Symphony Orchestra and Griffin Choral Arts of Griffin, Georgia, paired their performance of the cantata with works by Aaron Copland. In spring 2025, the Westminster Symphonic Choir, under the direction of Donald Nally, performed the piece as part of the Third Celebration of Black Music at Westminster Choir College. While not an exhaustive list, these performances reflect the growing attention and appreciation for the work across the nation in recent years.

Conclusion

Hiawatha's Wedding Feast stands as a monumental work that blends Western classical traditions, American poetry, and Indigenous storytelling. Its success, both in its immediate reception and its legacy, underscores Coleridge-Taylor's unique ability to fuse diverse musical elements into a cohesive, evocative expression of celebration, unity, and love. Using the text of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, Coleridge-Taylor's approach to the music transcends mere representation of cultures, infusing the text with his own creative vision through