while, preparations were underway for another première of a new piece by Delius, entitled *Dance Rhapsody*.

♯

Leila Bull was nervous, very nervous indeed. She knew she was a rather passable oboist, but this new instrument was demanding to play, and she had not had much opportunity to practice – at least not nearly enough for her own taste. Here she sat in the Hereford Shire Hall, with over a hundred other musicians on stage, and Frederick Delius, the composer, looked straight at her. She closed her lips around the strangely wide reed, waiting for Delius to begin the piece. 'Soft, sweet and clear,' he had said countless times in rehearsal. Did the man have any idea how difficult that was, especially towards the end of the introduction, when the melody descended to the low D? It also didn't help that Delius, ingenious composer that he may have been, was not the most confident of conductors. Right now, he looked like he might feel as nervous as she did.

Here came the downbeat, and over a soft ground of divided celli, propelled by a subdued pizzicato chord from the double basses, Leila began her solo. This strange and beautiful, slightly oriental melody, alternating quavers and triplets, now weaving together with the cor anglais into a duet. So close, the two tonal colours, and yet two distinctly different shades. The heckelphone produced a richer, warmer colour … if only it weren't so difficult to achieve the softness needed to balance well with the cor anglais. Now, her instrument switched partners, pairing up with the clarinet, an instrument that could easily produce the softest of sounds. Well, this heckelphone could not, or at least she wasn't able to do it, so

to balance the sound, the solo clarinetist had to play his line at least mezzo-forte. The hollower, clearer sound of the clarinet provided a heightened contrast to the full and complex sound of the heckelphone, and as she was playing, Leila Bull thought that what Delius had done in this introduction to his piece was really not only clever, but also very beautiful. If only she'd had another few weeks to practice on this unfamiliar instrument …

♮

Frederick Delius had in fact been very apprehensive about the première of his *Dance Rhapsody*. Dating back to the early 1700s, the Three Choirs Festival was one of the most important annual events in England; especially over the 19th century, it had drawn not only many prominent composers and conductors, but also increasingly large crowds. Furthermore, since 1904, Hereford was home to Britain's most famous composer, Sir Edward Elgar. And to further heighten Delius's anxiety, he had caught a severe cold mere days before the concert.

In the months leading up to the performance, Delius had been in correspondence with George Sinclair, the organist at Hereford Cathedral and director of the festival. As with Beecham, the composer had taken great care to explain his need for the heckelphone, but there had been a misunderstanding as to who was going to procure the instrument. In the end, Sinclair reached out to his contacts in the London music scene, and word of this soon reached Thomas Beecham.

In the première of *Mass of Life*, there had been problems, as Beecham knew well. Parts of the piece were hellishly difficult, especially for the choir. Another issue had been caused by the strange instrument Delius had written into the

score, the heckelphone. From his connections throughout the city of London, Beecham knew that Henry Wood had recently acquired a heckelphone for the Queen's Hall Orchestra, but he couldn't get himself to approach the man with whom he felt locked into deep and unpleasant rivalry. Unfortunately, the baritone oboe player he had hired instead did not at all meet his standards, and Beecham had felt compelled to give the man a rather stern lecture after he and his instrument had let him down with a decidedly unsatisfactory performance.

Beecham also wasn't all too happy that Delius hadn't come to him in the first place regarding the première of his *Dance Rhapsody*. Here was an outstanding composer who simply couldn't leave the arrangement of performances to those more experienced in the matter! In this spirit, he sent a letter to Delius five weeks before the performance in Hereford, telling him that *"the man who played the bass oboe in the Mass has overhauled the instrument and got to the bottom of it. He now makes it sound most beautiful and it is quite in tune."* Never shy to take a strong position, he added: *"If I were you I should write to Sinclair and tell him this or else you will be saddled with this other instrument which I am sure you will not like."*

Alas, it was too late, and Sinclair had succeeded in securing the use of Henry Wood's heckelphone, which was to be played by Leila Bull, one of the few rather well-established female woodwind players in England at the time, and a resident of Hereford.

When Thomas Beecham learned that his advice had gone unheeded, he was livid. Little did it matter that the critics were positive towards the piece and its use of the heckelphone, not only in the *Hereford Times*, three days after the performance on 8 September 1909, but also, a little later, in the much more

widely read *Musical Times*, which opined: *"The second novelty, Mr. Delius's 'Dance rhapsody,' is as much in the style of the present day as Mr. Bantock's suite is in that of three hundred years ago. Its grace and charm expressed in modern idiom is great. Much effect is secured from the use of the heckelphone, a bass oboe, and the harmonic scheme is new and striking."*

Even less did it matter that Beecham hadn't actually attended the concert. His advice should not have been ignored! And so he began to circulate his own version of what had transpired, in which the concert had taken place in Hereford Cathedral rather than the Shire Hall, and the public, which had assembled *"in anticipation of some pensive and poetical effort from the most discussed musician of the day, was confounded by the frequent audition of noises that resembled nothing so much as the painful endeavour of an anguished mother-duck to effect the speedy evacuation of an abnormally large-sized egg".*

♮

Meanwhile, preparations were in high gear for another performance of Delius's *Mass of Life*, in Elberfeld, where Hans Haym had finally succeeded in securing the necessary support. Haym had attended the London première and found it wanting. Already in June he had written in a letter to Delius how much he admired the many details contained in the score that did not see the light of day in Beecham's performance; this piece, he felt, needed *"more rehearsal, and a loving attention to detail"* – something he, who had studied the work for over three years now, and Delius's music for over a decade, was uniquely positioned to bring to the podium. As the rehearsals

in Elberfeld progressed, Haym realised and wasn't shy to let Delius know, *"just how unsatisfactory and coarse the London performance was"*. Part of that had, of course, been the rather pitiful playing of the baritone oboe, which Beecham had substituted for the heckelphone.

Finally, on 11 December 1909, *Messe des Lebens*, as it was once again billed, was performed in Elberfeld, under the direction of Hans Haym, and in the presence of the composer. It was a great success, with standing ovations for Frederick Delius, who gracefully ceded the applause to the conductor and musicians, including – notably – the heckelphonist, who had delivered a convincing and beautiful performance.

Following this, *Messe des Lebens* was performed in several other cities on the European continent, and Delius began to be increasingly acknowledged as a great post-Wagnerian composer. Two years later, on 20 October 1911, the first concert of the Elberfeld Choral Society's centenary programme opened with a concert whose main part consisted once again of *Messe des Lebens*. Surprisingly, Haym, the Elberfeld Choral Society and the orchestra managed to further improve on the outstanding 1909 performance, to the point where a noted critic labelled the event *"a complete and brilliant success"* in which the orchestra had been *"luxuriating in the beauty of sound"*.

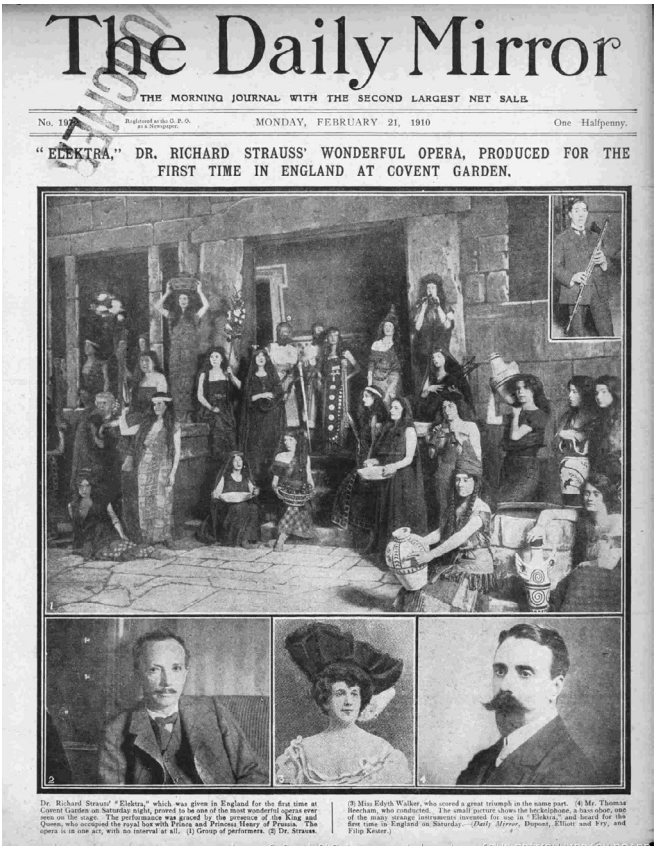
♮

Unfortunately, following his string of successes in 1909, Frederick Delius began to suffer from serious health problems. These began after the Hereford Festival, with a bilious attack involving headaches and severe abdominal pain, followed by

a more severe crisis of a similar nature in early 1910. A few months later, in June, he was diagnosed with tertiary syphilis in a sanatorium in Mammern, on the shore of Lower Lake Constance in Switzerland, where he had sought treatment. Although he didn't want to believe it, Delius knew that he had the disease. He knew, because he had been diagnosed with it, in its secondary stage, fifteen years earlier, in Paris, shortly after his friend, the painter Paul Gauguin. Those had been wild years, before he'd settled down with Jelka … and now he was going to pay the price. Tertiary syphilis was incurable.

Meanwhile, Thomas Beecham's star was rising swiftly. Starting in 1910, fuelled by his father's fortune, he started organising concerts and opera performances at Covent Garden and other London venues. Many of these he conducted himself, while for others, he acted as impresario, always ensuring that new pieces would be presented. In 1910 alone, he staged 34 operas, most of them never heard before in London – including Richard Strauss's *Elektra* (on 19 February) and *Salome* (on 8 December).

Beecham's plan had been to open the season, on 19 February, with *Salome*, but the censor, Lord Chamberlain Charles Spencer (whose great-granddaughter, Diana Spencer, would play an important role seventy years later), had refused to consent to a performance of the scandalous piece. Hence, *Elektra* was programmed instead. Of course, once again, the need for a heckelphone arose. Beecham knew better than to argue with Strauss, widely considered Europe's foremost composer at the time. Stubbornly unwilling to ask for assistance from Henry Wood, he decided on a gamble: He would simply pass off as a heckelphone the instrument that was going to be used. And thus, following the first performance, on the front page of *The*



The Daily Mirror

THE MORNING JOURNAL WITH THE SECOND LARGEST NET SALE

No. 1[illegible] Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper. MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1910 One Halfpenny.

"ELEKTRA," DR. RICHARD STRAUSS' WONDERFUL OPERA, PRODUCED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ENGLAND AT COVENT GARDEN.

Dr. Richard Strauss' "Elektra," which was given in England for the first time at Covent Garden on Saturday night, proved to be one of the most wonderful operas ever seen on the stage. The performance was graced by the presence of the King and Queen, who occupied the royal box with Prince and Princess Henry of Prussia. The opera is in one act, with no interval at all. (1) Group of performers. (2) Dr. Strauss. (3) Miss Edyth Walker, who scored a great triumph in the same part. (4) Mr. Thomas Beecham, who conducted. The small picture shows the heckelphone, a bass oboe, one of the many strange instruments invented for use in "Elektra," and heard for the first time in England on Saturday.—(*Daily Mirror*, Dupont, Elliott and Fry, and Filip Keizer.)

Front page coverage for the London première of *Elektra* (21 February 1910)

Daily Mirror, one of England's most widely read newspapers, pictures of Strauss, Beecham and the opera company appeared, as well as a photograph of a baritone oboe, along with the erroneous claim that it showed *"the heckelphone, a bass oboe, one of the many strange instruments invented for use in* Elektra*, and heard for the first time in England"*.

Predictably, Strauss's opera had been a sensational success – not least, because the composer himself conducted two performances. He had noticed right away that, against his instructions, instead of the heckelphone he required, a French baritone oboe was being used, and was not able to achieve the desired effect.

At first, Strauss was tempted to raise the issue with those responsible, but then, pragmatism got the upper hand. This Thomas Beecham, self-taught and eccentric as he might be, had managed to put *Elektra* on a London stage and was getting close to obtaining permission for performing *Salome*. He had made sure that the London première of *Elektra* had been a resounding success, attended and applauded by royalty and nobility, and paid him, the composer and guest conductor, handsomely. Of course, the baritone oboe didn't really do the job, but the man who played it wasn't bad … So, for the time being, Strauss decided to simply ignore the matter of the heckelphone.

Unbeknownst to Strauss, that was the second time a baritone oboe would be used to substitute for the heckelphone he had specified, as the same had happened in 1907, at the première of the French version of *Salome*. On that occasion, even the case of the instrument had been deliberately mislabelled '*Heckelphone*'. However, this time, the very public misrepresentation of the baritone oboe in would cause lasting confusion between the two instruments, and Beecham's influence would sustain it.

Later, after the second of the London performances of *Elektra* conducted by Strauss, when he sat together with Beecham, both men delighted with the success of their endeavour, he said most amicably: "You know Beecham, I am

truly grateful you organised all this, and I am certain you will sort things out with the censor, so that my *Salome* can also be staged. But then, dear Beecham, please use the instruments for which I wrote. This baritone oboe won't do, and you know it. Its tone is too weak. Do us both a favour and get the proper instrument from Heckel."

And so, not only was Henry Wood's heckelphone used for Beecham's production of *Salome*, but Beecham liked it enough that he ended up ordering one for his own orchestra. Heckelphone #50 was completed in April 1911 and used prominently not only in the Beecham Symphony Orchestra, but also (along with the baritone oboe) in the newly established London Civil Band.

Meanwhile, a chain of events had been set in motion that would culminate in the completion and first performance of one of the most famous pieces of English music up to our days. At the age of 23, in 1897, Gustav Holst had played the trombone under the baton of Richard Strauss at the Queen's Hall. This, in combination with the music of Richard Wagner, had made a deep impression on the young composer. To his close friend, Ralph Vaughan Williams, he wrote that *"one ought to follow Wagner until he leads you to fresh things".* For Holst to find those fresh things, his own unmistakable style, it took a combination of influences from the music of Maurice Ravel, English folksongs and Hindu spiritualism.

In 1908, on advice from his doctor, Gustav Holst spent some time in Algeria. There, he absorbed the Arabic folk music he heard on his extended walks in the streets, and much of this

Gustav Holst (ca. 1921)

he wove into an intriguing piece of music, a suite entitled *Beni Mora*. First performed in May 1912 at the Queen's Hall, the piece was dismissed by some as failing to transcend its oriental source material, and praised by others as demonstrating extraordinary skill of its composer in weaving Arabic tunes into a unique and captivating piece of music.

Then, in 1913, noted English conductor and composer Balfour Gardiner invited Holst along with the brothers Arnold and Clifford Bax to spend a holiday with him on the island of Mallorca. Arnold Bax was a composer who, once a great admirer of Wagner and Strauss, had of late started to explore Celtic culture. His younger brother Clifford was a writer with a keen interest in astrology. There, in Mallorca, Holst befriended the Bax brothers, and particularly Clifford's explanations of the

influence of the stars and planets on those born under them fascinated him. Holst soon felt that the mythological characters associated with the heavenly bodies and constellations could be expressed in music, and that, if this was done just right, it might appeal to as broad an audience as the reading of horoscopes and the gazing at the night sky. And thus the idea was born for a richly orchestrated suite that would become his opus 32, *The Planets*.

On their long walks, the three composers – Gustav Holst, Arnold Bax and Balfour Gardiner – would talk about this idea, and about the importance of tonal colours for such an undertaking. Holst, whose approach to instrumentation was rather minimalist, was surprised to hear both Bax and Gardiner speak about new and rarely used instruments, and it was in this context that one day, Bax mentioned the impression Richard Strauss's use of the then brand-new heckelphone had made on him, when he had attended the première of *Salome*, eight years earlier in Dresden.

"There you have an instrument," he said, "which can be used to marvellous effect, closing a gap most musicians wouldn't even know existed, until they heard it filled in this particular way. My friend, this is something you should hear!"

"There's one in London, you know," said Gardiner, "at the Queen's Hall. And if I remember right, Covent Garden now has one, too. Didn't Delius make use of it, in his *Dance Rhapsody*?"

♮

In the Autumn of 1913, the Music-Historical Museum Wilhelm Heyer in Cologne was unveiled to the public. The stately villa commissioned by Heyer housed his entire collection of 2600