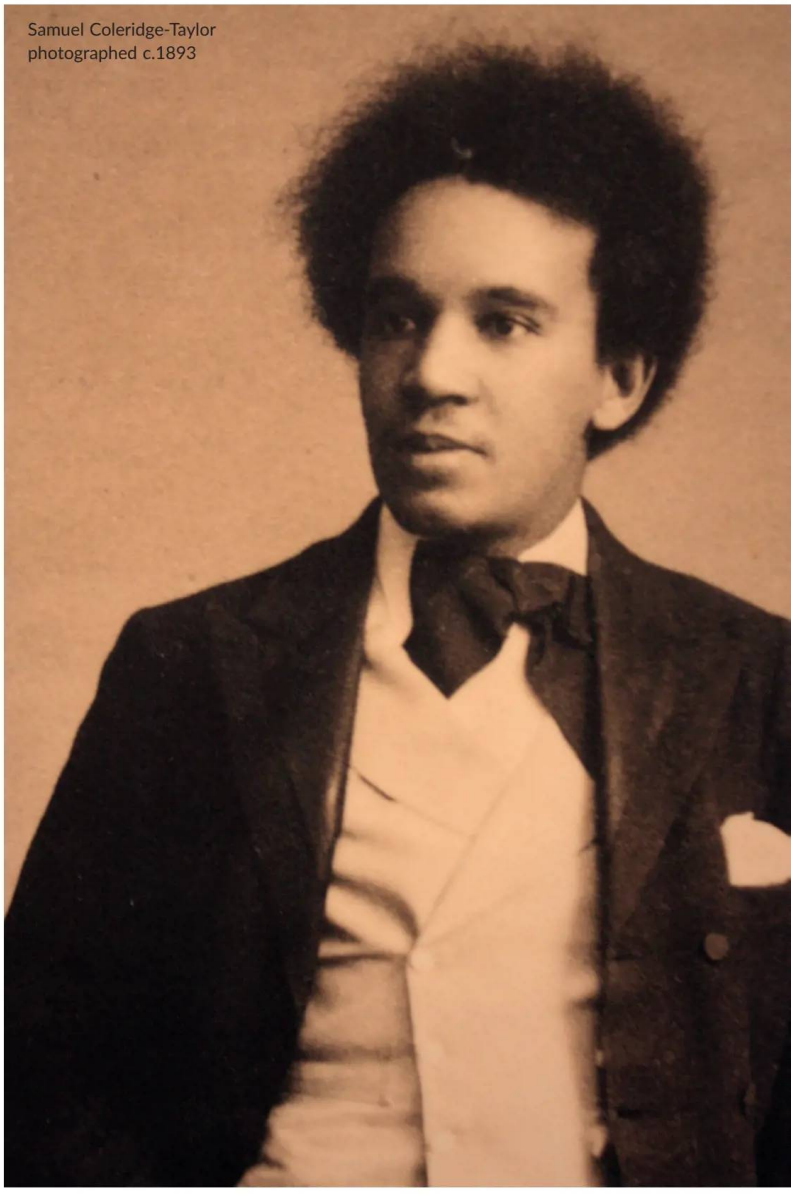
‘A MESSAGE OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE’

August 2025 marks 150 years since the birth of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the British composer and violinist. **Bruce Hodges** speaks to five leading violinists about what his music means to them

In a landscape where Bach and Beethoven are household names, many fans of classical music are still unaware of the works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912), who during his lifetime was lauded by some as the ‘Black Dvořák’ or the ‘African Mahler’. During the early 20th century, public awareness of the British composer and violinist was widespread; he undertook three tours to the US: in 1904 (when the US President Theodore Roosevelt welcomed him to the White House), 1906 and 1910.

On 15 August 2025, the music world will celebrate 150 years since Coleridge-Taylor’s birth. He was born in London to an English mother and Sierra Leonean father, the latter a doctor who was forced to leave the country, since at that time he was not permitted to practise medicine in England. He gained sponsorship to attend the newly established Royal College of Music in London aged 17, where one of his composition teachers was founder professor Charles Villiers Stanford. The young man soon caught the attention of audiences as well as that of Edward Elgar, who urged the Three Choirs Festival to commission from him the op.33 orchestral work Ballade in A minor (1898).

Coleridge-Taylor died of pneumonia at the height of his powers in 1912 aged only 37 and, apart from occasional performances of his best-known work, *The Song of Hiawatha*, his music fell into obscurity in the second half of the 20th century. But he left behind a body of fine string music, including his last major work, the Violin Concerto in G minor (1912), which was written at the behest of US violinist Maud Powell (1867–1920). During the past 25 years, more of his music has been unearthed and awareness of it has steadily grown, as its quality speaks for itself. And even in the three years since *The Strad*’s article about his violin and chamber music (‘From Fame to Footnote’, March 2022), there seems to have been a further explosion of interest in his music. Here, a handful of renowned violinists weigh in with their thoughts about his music and its impact.



Samuel Coleridge-Taylor photographed c.1893

NATHAN AMARAL

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Amaral began studying the violin when he was twelve years old, as part of a social initiative designed to remove children from a world of crime and drug abuse. He went on to study at the New England Conservatory in Boston. In 2021 he founded the Week of Musical Integration, a festival dedicated to supporting and teaching young Brazilian musicians regardless of their background, and in 2024, aged 28, he won first prize in the Sphinx Competition.

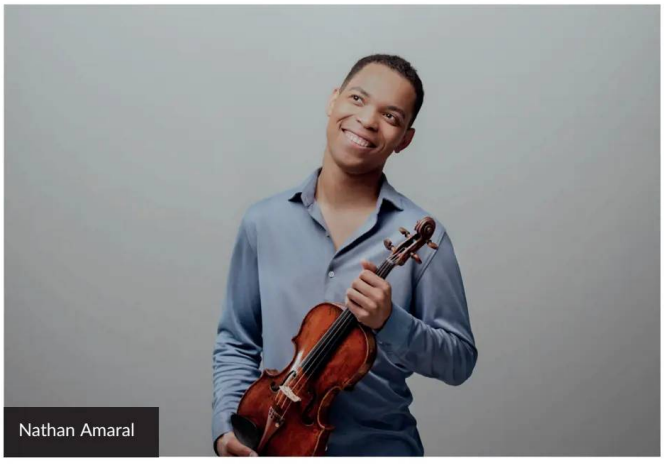
Was the Violin Concerto in G minor your first encounter with Coleridge-Taylor? What are your current thoughts on the piece, whether technically or stylistically?
Yes, thanks to the Sphinx Competition, I came across this wonderful composer whose music I had the luck to fall in love with. I found it incredibly interesting how in his Violin Concerto he managed to integrate the African and African American musical elements into the Western classical tradition. Technically, his concerto utilises a rich melodic and harmonic language; he often features pentatonic melodies, syncopated rhythms and bluesy harmonies.

How would you describe his music to someone who has never heard it before?
Coleridge-Taylor's musical style is often inspired by spiritual and folk tunes. It is both sophisticated and accessible: you'll find melodies that stick in your mind, harmonies that evoke both joy and longing, and a rhythmic energy that feels fresh even today – for example, in his Nonet in F minor.

What is something about Coleridge-Taylor that people may not know?
Even though he was a brilliant composer and conductor, he still faced significant racial prejudice throughout his career because of his mixed-race heritage. He was never fully accepted into the 'upper ranks' of the musical elite and often struggled to secure commissions and recognition. Besides that, I recently learnt that he was invited to the White House by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904.

I personally connect with his music because it celebrates diversity. Being of mixed race myself, I struggled for some time to understand where I belong, but his music helped me to feel accepted and to celebrate the beautiful differences that make us unique.

'I PERSONALLY CONNECT WITH COLERIDGE-TAYLOR'S MUSIC BECAUSE IT CELEBRATES DIVERSITY' – *NATHAN AMARAL*


Nathan Amaral

RANDALL GOOSBY

Goosby was born in California in 1996, to a Korean mother and an African American father. After his New York Philharmonic debut at age 13, he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Juilliard School, followed by an Artist Diploma. On his first recording, titled Roots, *he included Coleridge-Taylor's arrangement of* Deep River *(originally written for the piano) in a transcription for violin and piano by Maud Powell, the violinist who commissioned the composer's Violin Concerto.*

In 2021 you featured Coleridge-Taylor's arrangement of *Deep River* on your first album. What were your thoughts on his music at that time, and have they evolved, four years later?
Roots being a celebration of African American music and composers, it would have been a missed opportunity not to include an African American spiritual. When I was putting together the track list, we were in the thick of both the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Coleridge-Taylor's setting of this classic spiritual was one of the first pieces I thought to include, because it carries a message of hope and resilience in the face of injustice. Unfortunately, this theme is just as relevant today as it was during the BLM movement, or at any other time in US history, for that matter.

What would you like someone new to Coleridge-Taylor to know? Which works would you point them to – ones that mean something to you personally?
I think it's important for new listeners to understand that Coleridge-Taylor was a highly respected and celebrated composer during his short life. He was championed by Elgar, labelled a musical genius by UK critics and toured internationally. Although he died at just 37 years old, his music made waves throughout Europe and garnered a huge ▹


Randall Goosby

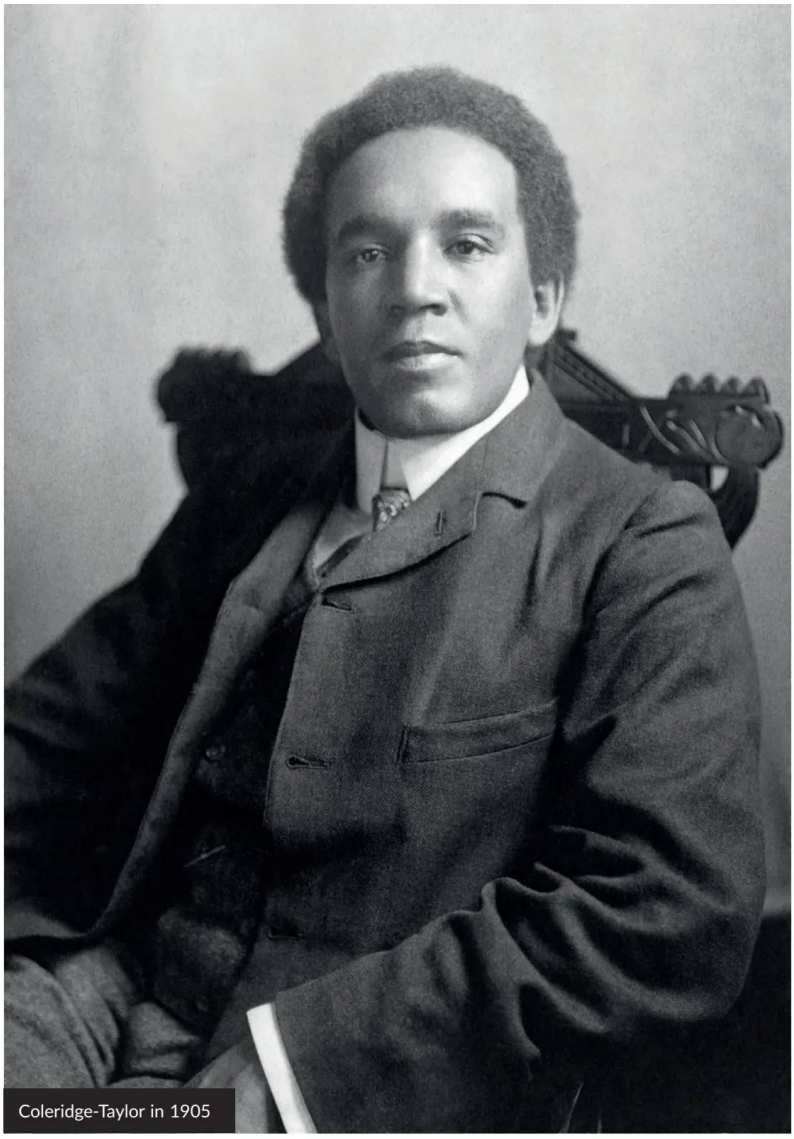
AMARAL PHOTO CLARA EVENS. GOOSBY PHOTO OLLIE ALI

'IT'S IMPORTANT FOR NEW LISTENERS TO UNDERSTAND THAT COLERIDGE-TAYLOR WAS A HIGHLY RESPECTED AND CELEBRATED COMPOSER DURING HIS SHORT LIFE' – *RANDALL GOOSBY*

following in the US. His most famous work is undoubtedly his cantata cycle *The Song of Hiawatha*. I personally love his chamber music, and would highly recommend his Nonet in F minor, the Clarinet Quintet in F sharp minor, his incredibly charming *Suite de pièces* for violin and piano and his Violin Concerto in G minor.

In the broader sense, what does the increasingly visible profile of this composer say about changes in classical music culture?
The resurgence of Coleridge-Taylor and countless other composers of colour is a clear sign that classical music is ready for a big change, and it is long overdue. As much as we will always revere the music of Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, it's time for us to paint a more complete picture of the history of this magical art form. Music serves the primary purpose of telling a story, connecting people across backgrounds and generations through shared human experience. By broadening the scope of the stories we tell in the concert hall, we can extend the reach of classical music to people from all walks of life, and create a landscape that truly reflects the rich diversity of our world.

If you could have lunch with Coleridge-Taylor, what would you talk about?
I would definitely want to learn more about his relationship to his African roots, and what his views were on the relationship between music of African origin and classical music. I would be particularly curious to know who his favourite musicians and composers of colour were. On a less serious note, I would want to know about his favourite foods! I am a big foodie, and as strange as it may seem, I sometimes imagine memorable flavours when I'm going for a certain quality of sound.



Coleridge-Taylor in 1905

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

RACHEL BARTON PINE

One of the earliest champions of Coleridge-Taylor, American violinist Pine included his Romance in G major on her landmark 1997 album Violin Concertos by Black Composers of the 18th and 19th Centuries. *In 2022, marking the 25th anniversary of that project, Cedille's re-release (entitled* Violin Concertos by Black Composers through the Centuries*) added Florence Price's Violin Concerto no.2 to the programme.*

You were one of the earliest champions of Coleridge-Taylor, almost 30 years ago. How did you discover his music?
In 1997, when I was about to make my fourth album, which was my first as soloist with orchestra, I decided I wanted to wait a little longer before starting to record all of the most famous concertos. Instead, I wanted to find some first-rate repertoire that was under-recorded. Growing up in Chicago, I was familiar with the treasure trove of classical works by black composers, thanks to the efforts of conductor Michael Morgan (1957–2021), the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR; at Columbia College Chicago) and its New Black Music Repertory Ensemble, and the Chicago Sinfonietta. I went to CBMR to look for works for violin and orchestra and found some wonderful concertos from the 18th and 19th centuries by José White Lafitte, Saint-Georges and Coleridge-Taylor. There wasn't enough room on the album for Coleridge-Taylor's entire concerto, but I fell in love with his beautiful Romance in G.

It's gorgeously lyrical, but technically very challenging owing to its constant use of double-stops.

The violinist Maud Powell is my musical hero, for both her artistry and her values. She was the first white instrumentalist actively to champion works by black composers. She and Coleridge-Taylor worked closely together – she was the dedicatee of his Violin Concerto and made a beautiful arrangement for violin and piano of his version of the spiritual *Deep River*, which I perform very frequently.

Please tell readers of *The Strad* what you find engaging about his writing for strings, either stylistically or technically.
While Coleridge-Taylor was a violinist, and his violin writing is very comfortable for the instrument, it's not pyrotechnically virtuosic on the level of that of Wieniawski or Vieuxtemps. But each piece is full of character, giving the performers plenty of opportunity to bring their own individual personality to choices about expressive shifts, colours and timing.

Under-recognised repertoire presents a particular challenge for students and professionals. Without a multigenerational legacy of performance and pedagogy, there's no 'usual interpretation' to rely upon for most of these works. You can't just get your teacher's fingerings and listen to recordings by various soloists in the way that you can with more well-known repertoire. You can't read dissertations analysing the composer's body of work. And if the composer is dead, you can't just text them with your questions! This means you have to work a little harder to figure out how to bring the music to life, but it also gives you the freedom to use your own imagination.

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Rachel Barton Pine

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

What else would you like people to know about Coleridge-Taylor?
The very fact that a black man in England had a successful career as a classical violinist, conductor and composer in the late 18th and early 19th century still comes as a big surprise for many people. The African American writer and political activist W.E.B. Du Bois brought Coleridge-Taylor to the US, and African American educationist Booker T. Washington wrote the foreword to his collection of spirituals transcribed for solo piano, calling him the 'greatest musician of our race'.

CURTIS STEWART

The six-time Grammy-nominated American violinist and composer is artistic director of the American Composers Orchestra, professor at the Juilliard School and a member of the PUBLIQuartet and the Mighty Third Rail. Earlier this year he was awarded the Sphinx Medal of Excellence. For the Coleridge-Taylor anniversary, Stewart is releasing an album featuring world premiere recordings of the composer's works.

Please tell us about your upcoming Coleridge-Taylor recording with the National Philharmonic at Strathmore, and how the project came together.
Conductor Michael Repper and I met in 2023, the year of the Grammy nomination for his New York Youth Symphony recording of works by Jessie Montgomery, Valerie Coleman and Florence Price – and when it won, it was a stunning and celebratory time. As a former high school conductor, I couldn't help but root for him and the kids, and we kept in touch.

In the meantime, I began recomposing (for violin and strings) three of Coleridge-Taylor's solo piano set of *24 Negro Melodies*, which I performed in 2024 with the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, and on the upcoming album, these are paired with some of Coleridge-Taylor's own orchestral arrangements of the melodies. It is an experiment in interaction with folk music, in exploring the nature of recomposition, and in honouring the past by considering influences in the present.

I am always looking for the blues in my own violin playing, since I see the blues as an essentially American classical music. I relate to and empathise with Coleridge-Taylor's endeavour as an English composer to collect, synthesise and frame African diaspora music from around the world in his own musical language – to find a meaning in classical music that belongs to him, that sounds like him.

How would you describe Coleridge-Taylor's style?
Harmonically and texturally, Coleridge-Taylor's work is typical of turn-of-the-century Victorian-era English music. Since he was a violinist himself, the op.4 Ballade in D minor for violin and orchestra (our recording likely a world premiere one) is very violinistic, reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's writing for the instrument – rich melodies along the G string, and arpeggios flashing across melodic moments. It is a joy to play. You really get to lean into your voice on the violin while still leaping around in fun, gymnastic ways. The character is both brooding and light-hearted – it's the music of a young man making a name for himself, expressing his lows and highs, heart fully on his sleeve. ▹

What is something about Coleridge-Taylor that people might not know?
For me, Coleridge-Taylor's research was a predecessor of the work of Bartók. He pulled folk influences from the black diaspora around the world into his own style of composition and his own musical voice. This is something I aim to do with my own composition: speaking old sentiments with a contemporary musical language – old wine, new bottles.

During Coleridge-Taylor's time in a newly industrialising England, I often wonder how the rapidly changing socio-economic situation made a composer like him possible. For me, the emergence of recording technology and social media is strongly responsible for my own ability to demonstrate the possibilities of my instrument and compositional sensibility. I remember telling a teaching colleague about wanting to find the blues in classical music, which was met with a questioningly raised brow. The ability to explore and try things out with a community on the internet has changed what is possible for me as an artist. I wonder how Coleridge-Taylor interacted with the changes during his time, in order to exist as himself…

'COLERIDGE-TAYLOR WAS A PREDECESSOR OF BARTÓK. HE PULLED FOLK INFLUENCES FROM THE BLACK DIASPORA INTO HIS OWN STYLE'
– CURTIS STEWART

ELENA URIOSTE

A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard School, 39-year-old American Urioste is co-director of the Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective, which released a recording of chamber music by Coleridge-Taylor in 2022, the year that Urioste also released a recording of his works with the Chineke! Orchestra. She is the founder of Chamber Music by the Sea, an annual US festival at the Maryland seashore.

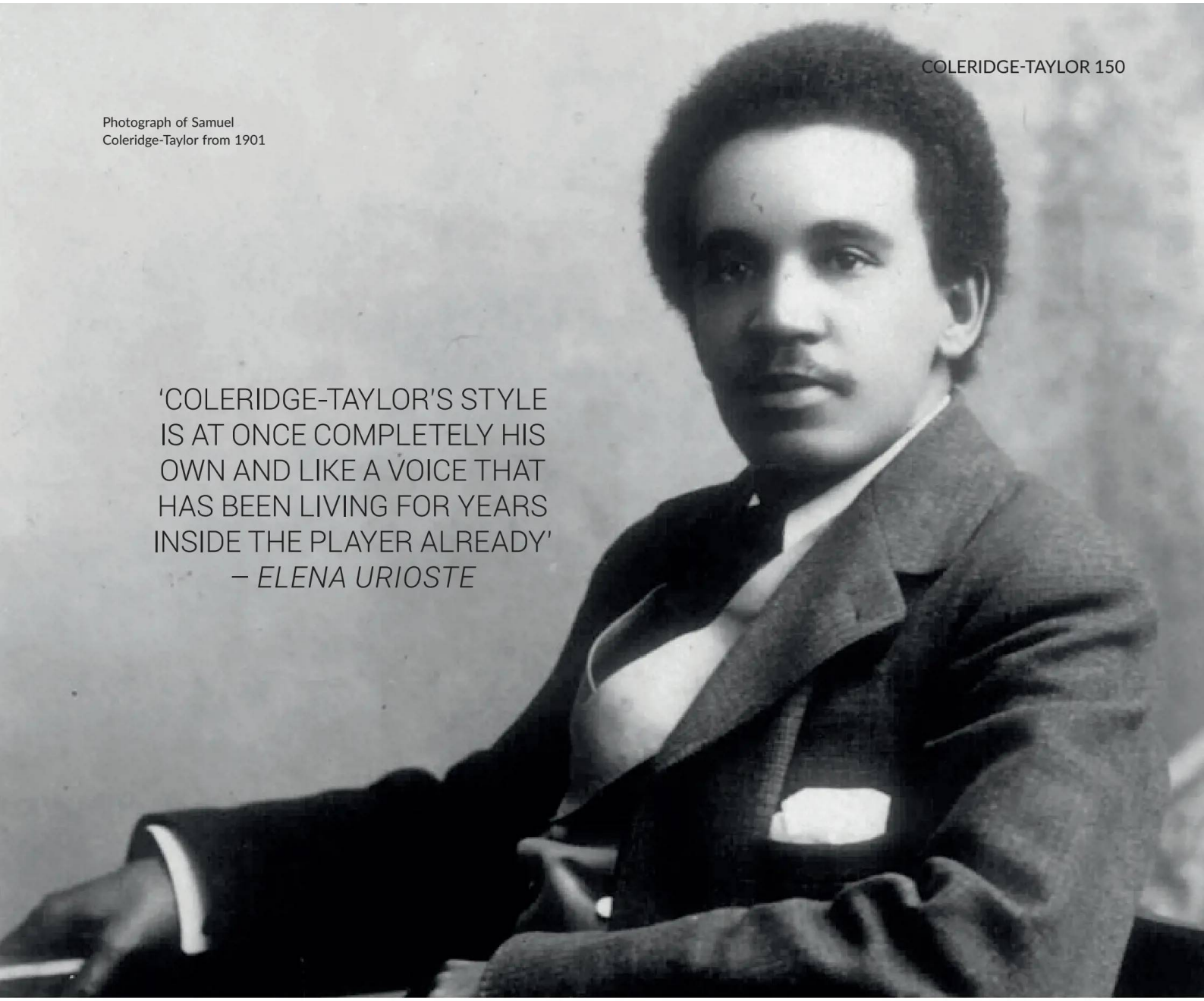
Please give us some background on how you conceived the programme for your 2022 Chineke! Orchestra recording of Coleridge-Taylor's Violin Concerto and Romance
In November 2019 – a few months before the start of the pandemic – I had the pleasure of touring the Coleridge-Taylor concerto with the Chineke! Orchestra. It was the most beautiful experience to feel the piece evolve and breathe over the course of our six-city European tour, and by the end, the seed had been planted to record the work. It took until April 2021 to get everything in place (and for it to be physically safe for such a large group to reconvene). But the fact that we were able to memorialise this music on an album feels all the more special given the circumstances – which, by that point, also included my being five months pregnant!

How would you describe his style, and his influence? Could you comment specifically on his writing for strings?
I often describe Coleridge-Taylor's music as feeling like an old friend: in addition to it being lush, romantic and extremely empathetic to the technical workings of the violin, there's something very familiar about his musical voice. He was, of course, influenced by Elgar, and there are hints of Dvořák here and there, but his style is at once completely his own and like a voice that has been living for years inside the player already.


Curtis Stewart


Elena Urioste

STEWART PHOTO ELMAN STUDIO. URIOSTE PHOTO CHRIS GLOAG



Photograph of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor from 1901

'COLERIDGE-TAYLOR'S STYLE IS AT ONCE COMPLETELY HIS OWN AND LIKE A VOICE THAT HAS BEEN LIVING FOR YEARS INSIDE THE PLAYER ALREADY'
– *ELENA URIOSTE*

His most famous work is likely the cantata–trilogy *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. What other works by him do you admire?
My ensemble the Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective considers his early Nonet to be one of our 'signature' pieces, and indeed, it was the focus of our second album. Although it's an early work, Coleridge-Taylor's voice is already firmly established, and there are many tender melodies, interesting textures, and incredibly fun interactions between all nine instruments. I'm also a fan of the op.73 Ballade in C minor, which I've recorded with Tom Poster. It's perhaps not quite as sophisticated as the other works mentioned, but it's a beautiful and impassioned mini-odyssey for violin and piano.

'I OFTEN DESCRIBE COLERIDGE-TAYLOR'S MUSIC AS FEELING LIKE AN OLD FRIEND'
– *ELENA URIOSTE*

What else would you like people to know about the man, the composer, and his work?
Coleridge-Taylor died just a few months after the premiere of his Violin Concerto. The following passage, from his obituary published in *The Musical Herald* on 1 October 1912, is a testament to his passion and commitment:

> Going to the Crystal Palace on August 27, he found himself recovering from unconsciousness at West Croydon Station. He managed to get home, took to his bed, and the attack developed into pneumonia. Gradually, he lost strength and at last sank into unconsciousness. At half past five on Sunday evening, September 1, he sat up in bed, still unconscious, and conducted the whole of his new violin concerto with remarkable vigour. This lasted 25 minutes. When he reached the end, he bowed, as if to the band, smiled, fell back upon his pillow, and, with the smile still upon his face, passed away. ●