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Uncovering the forgotten music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

As the 150th anniversary of Coleridge-Taylor's birth approaches, a bold new studio album breathes fresh life into long-overlooked works by one of the early 20th century's most celebrated Black composers. We sat down with GRAMMY®-winning conductor Michael Repper and GRAMMY®-nominated violinist-arranger Curtis Stewart to explore legacy, spirituals and what it means to reimagine history through sound

This recording features the world-premiere studio performances of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's tone poem *Toussaint L'Ouverture* and *Ballade* Op. 4, alongside a newly uncovered orchestral suite of five *Negro Melodies* and three modern reimaginings. Why was it important to bring these particular pieces to light now, and what do you hope listeners take away from hearing them?

Michael Repper (MR): These pieces deserve to be heard because they're exceptional music. Coleridge-Taylor had a powerful artistic voice, and the works on this album carry enormous emotional weight and cultural significance. They're deeply moving, beautifully crafted and unjustifiably have been left out of our mainstream concert repertoire.

It felt urgent to bring them forward now, when our field is beginning to confront those exclusions – and the reasons

behind them – more honestly. We also thought that the composer deserved a true celebration on what would have been his 150th birthday. But even more than that, we know listeners will fall in love with this music just like we did. I believe listeners will come away inspired by the sound and story behind these works and with a sense that there's still so much music out there waiting to be rediscovered and reimagined.

Curtis Stewart (CS): I have been looking for works deeply influenced by the blues and African folk music within a classical context for years – it was important for me to find music that resonates with that side of my musical heritage and upbringing, to hear the voice of my dad in these songs, to imagine their setting in church, to hear them related to the popular American music we experience in everyday life. The *Ballade* is an amazingly youthful and graceful work – I try to imagine what it must have been like to be Coleridge-Taylor at the turn of the 1900s, the rise of industrialisation changing what is possible in England and making opportunities for his music to be heard as a composer – to do it all with grace and joy is something I aspire to myself as a violinist–composer in 2025.

The project involved creating modern performance editions from Coleridge-Taylor's original manuscripts. What were the biggest challenges in preparing these scores for performance, and how did it influence your interpretation as a conductor?

MR: Preparing these scores was both exciting and complex. The manuscripts came from a variety of sources, such as the Library of Congress and the British Library. Each one presented its own set of challenges. Some materials were handwritten by Coleridge-Taylor himself, others by copyists, and some had markings that were incomplete, inconsistent or in need of interpretation. A great deal of care went into understanding what was there and how best to prepare the music for performance.

This work was done in consultation with Coleridge-Taylor scholars, especially Lionel Harrison and Patrick Meadows (who initially uncovered the *Ballade* and *Negro Melody Suite*). As a conductor, being so closely connected to that process allowed me a deeper relationship with the music.

Ultimately, our decision to release modern editions freely to the public was a direct extension of our mission. We believe anyone who hears this music and wants to perform it should be able to do so without cost and without barriers. That commitment to access was always at the heart of the project, and informed our every step, from the research to the rehearsal to the studio. When the album is released, these scores will be available on my website.

The album features your modern recompositions of three of Coleridge-Taylor's original *Negro Melodies*, alongside a newly uncovered suite arranged by Coleridge-Taylor himself. How did you approach honouring the original compositions while bringing your own contemporary voice to these pieces?

CS: The practice of "recomposing" a work lives somewhere between arrangement and composition. I begin by improvising on what is already there using the latent language in my ear, what the original material draws me to associate with, how the mathematics of the rhythmic constellations can be remapped to allude to other styles, what textures may heighten or recontextualise the feeling of the work for me. Those allusions can be culturally significant in that they point to deep connections between the musics; those latent connections imply that these distinct and respected styles, these peoples from deeply different backgrounds and their expression, aren't as far away as commercial or political boundaries would

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imply. The three recompositions on this album are closer to the arrangement side of a recomposition. They decorate the form that already exists, reharmonising slightly, throwing the different voices of the piano into curious combinations in the strings and adding extended techniques that point to rhythmic worlds that the folk songs evoke.

Coleridge-Taylor identified unequivocally as a Black man and drew inspiration from African and African American musical traditions. How does his legacy resonate with your own artistic and cultural identity, and what significance do you feel it holds within today's classical music world?

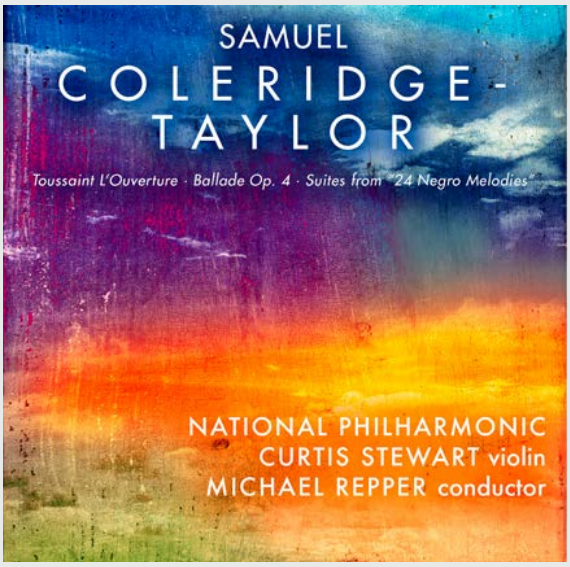
CS: As long as Americans have been composing concert music, the blues has existed in its language. I think of the blues as a North American classical music. We refer to the spirit of that music, we refer to the literal harmonic configuration for meaning of tension and vocal sensibility, we look to the form as a sense of development and return, a return to the blues as the natural state of things, happy, hopeful, woeful or longing for home. In my opinion, there could be no American classical music without the blues – even some of our sense of abstraction stems from distancing ourselves from that reference point. The blues is not necessarily only a Black American music, though it has been popularly and socially allowed as a value of Black expression. My mother and father are both musicians deeply affected by their own specificities and extensions of their blues, their own folk – Greek music, Polish Roma music, rhythm and blues, second-line band music, et cetera. I am finding my own version of this from my American classical training – the thing about the blues for me is that many cultures' voices can hold space inside of their own "blue note".

You've spoken about the importance of making music more inclusive and community rooted. How does this Coleridge-Taylor project reflect your broader mission as a conductor and artistic leader?

MR: Great music should be heard. As professional musicians, our performances and our work should be vehicles for positive change. Coleridge-Taylor's works are full of beauty, depth and meaning, and occupy an important position in classical music's legacy. Bringing them into spaces where they hadn't been heard, at least for over a century, and making the performance materials freely available aligns with the broader goal of making classical music more open, more representative, and more connected to the people who engage with it.

You've called the blues "America's mother-music." How do you see this album, and Coleridge-Taylor's work more broadly, contributing to a redefinition of the American concert repertoire?

CS: I don't think it is possible to redefine American concert repertoire. Brahms is not American concert repertoire, except that it occupies a majority of American concert stage programmes. Beethoven is not American concert repertoire. American concert repertoire is just that. When American orchestras, soloists, chamber ensembles primarily programme American composers, there will be an American concert stage repertoire. Currently, to me, a general American concert repertoire does not exist. In my view American classical music and the music that gets programmed on American concert stages are two different things. One harks back to an imagined old world, and the other imagines what our world sounds and feels like. Coleridge-Taylor sought to be the Bartók of Black diaspora music (before Bartók was Bartók...) – the Tchaikovsky, the Mozart, the Bach, the Rachmaninov, the Copland, the Bernstein, the "you name it" of their culture, bringing their folk music into their concert repertoire. This is not a new idea, what is new is that certain types of folk music are NOT to be included in "American concert repertoire" for reasons... beyond me.



GRAMMY®-nominated violinist Curtis Stewart and GRAMMY®-winning conductor Michael Repper join the National Philharmonic for a landmark recording of works by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Released by Avie Records on 1 August 2025 to mark the composer's 150th birthday (15 August), the album features world-premiere studio recordings of *Toussaint L'Ouverture* and *Ballade* Op. 4 for Violin and Orchestra, alongside a newly uncovered orchestral suite of five *Negro Melodies* and three modern recompositions by Stewart, Hamilton Berry and Andrew Roitstein. All works draw from Coleridge-Taylor's original *24 Negro Melodies for Solo Piano.*

Accompanying the album, will be newly available free open-source PDF performance materials for music on the album by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor compiled by Michael Repper and Lionel Harrison. These will include *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (Michael Repper's Performance Edition), and *Ballade* Op. 4 and *5 Negro Melodies*, editions prepared by Coleridge-Taylor experts Lionel Harrison and Patrick Meadows, with edits by Michael Repper.
For more information and to access the free scores, visit mikerepper.com/coleridge-taylor-project