What do you give someone who's turning 150 years old? If that person is 20th-century English composer and violinist Samuel Coleridge-Taylor—and if you are the six-time Grammy-nominated violinist-composer Curtis Stewart—there is no better gift than a magnificent new recording that brings a few lost gems to a world that, until now, has rarely had the opportunity to hear them.

"It's a big responsibility, to deliver a performance that is, hopefully, both definitive and an accurate representation of Coleridge-Taylor's music, one that also captures the massively passionate and energetic feeling of his writing," says Stewart. "It's been quite an adventure. The hope is that with this recording, if I've accomplished everything I just said, that people will hear it and others—whether they are students or teachers or soloists—will pick it up and want to play it themselves."

The album, scheduled at press time for release in August by Avie Records, is a historic collection of previously unrecorded compositions by Coleridge-Taylor, who was born in London on August 15, 1875, and who died at the age of 37 in 1912. Of mixed-race parentage, he was a prolific composer and concert musician, though only a handful of his works are published and available to modern musicians and orchestras.

"Coleridge-Taylor is, without a doubt, one of the greatest composers of the turn of the 20th century, and the reality is that, given the sheer beauty and quality of his music, he simply does not get enough performances," says Michael Repper, who spearheaded the recording project and whose idea it was to put Coleridge-Taylor and Stewart together with the National Philharmonic Orchestra in Bethesda, Maryland. "I have known for years that there is music of Coleridge-Taylor's out in the ether that deserves to be found and resurrected," Repper says, "and I have long thought that orchestras need to be playing more of Coleridge-Taylor's music. If more of his music was accessible and existed in a way that was performable, and if there were a recording that showed how good it is, then more people would begin to play it."

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR
Curtis Stewart, violin; National Philharmonic, Michael Repper, cond. (Avie Records)

Among the many highlights of the new album is the composer's *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. Described in the liner notes as a "tone poem," the soaring work was inspired by the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture, considered the primary leader of the 1804 Haitian Revolution, which ultimately achieved freedom for thousands of enslaved Haitians under French colonial control. Also significant are *Ballade*, Op. 4, for violin and orchestra and *5 Negro Melodies*, the latter being Coleridge-Taylor's orchestrations of several Black American spirituals, including "I'm Troubled in Mind" and "Don't Be Weary, Traveler."

Another track on the album, *3 Negro Melodies*, is Stewart's "recomposition" of the tunes "Deep River," "They Will Not Lend Me a Child," and "The Angels Changed My Name." These three pieces and *5 Negro Melodies* come from Coleridge-Taylor's original piece *24 Negro Melodies*, first published in 1905.

"Coleridge-Taylor's music is both richly lyrical and very sweet at the same time," says Stewart. "It's truly amazing. And when you know something about his life, when you've learned a bit about everything he experienced, I always think—whenever I'm playing his music—about the incredible grace and poise he must have had, to be a Black musician in England at the time that he grew up there. It could not have been easy for him, but he left this astonishing collection of works, many of which have been lost but are now being rediscovered."

The process of finding, selecting, and preparing the compositions on the album has required more than two years of research and effort, Repper notes. But with the recording now completed—marking the first-ever recording by the National Philharmonic with Repper as conductor—the lengthy endeavor clearly has been well worth it.

"It does feel great to finally be tying the bow on this," Repper says. "Just today I got the artwork for the cover. It's very abstract, very colorful, because the music itself is very colorful, with a lot of cinematic expression and a kind of visual musical imagery throughout. One of the major missions I believe in, from my position at the podium, is to call attention to extraordinary music that has been overlooked and underperformed. So, yes, we are going to perform this music in public as often as possible, but even more important is that we've recorded it. When you record something, it's forever."

Stewart is no stranger to presenting classical music in ways that bring it to life for a new audience. Shortly before the Coleridge-Taylor album is set for release, his anticipated solo album *Seasons of Change* will have dropped as well (scheduled for June on the Bright Shiny Things label). Featuring Stewart's own recomposition of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the album is a powerful demonstration of why the *New York Times* has praised him as a giant in classical music, describing his approach as a combination of "omnivory and brilliance."

"For me, a recomposition is the next step beyond a 'fantasia' or 'fantasy,' like Franz Liszt's 'Fantasy on Themes of Woe,'" Stewart explains. "It's like you're tapping into the spirit of the work, the way it affects you, allowing elements of the original—maybe its rhythms, its orchestrations, certain harmonic patterns—to influence your own composition. The original becomes a seed, and you plant it and compose it anew."

Adding that the recompositions that appear on the Coleridge-Taylor album are "very conservative examples" of what a recomposition can be, Stewart points out that the three pieces, all folk songs from the African diaspora, are essentially already fantasias. "Samuel Coleridge-Taylor has basically already completed a fantasy on those original folk songs, two of which originated in Africa and one of which came from the States," he says. "He translated those folk songs into his own harmonic and rhythmic language, which was very

much of the late 1800s in England. So now, as an American in 2025, I am translating what he's done into my own American language. That means incorporating elements of the blues and some African rhythms I've heard, and finding a way to re-create, on the strings, some stomp-claps and some hip-hop stomp claps. All these things go into my reimagining of his own reimaginings."

In creating a recomposition of an existing work, a composer has the opportunity to recontextualize the music in a way that, when returning to the original after hearing the new version, listeners hear something fresh in it. "You can recognize and appreciate the original for what it is, even more," Stewart says. "Of course, the obvious pitfall is that, because you want to respect the original composition, you don't want to change too much."

Repper is clear that having Stewart on the project as a violinist was important precisely because of his knack for recomposition. "One of the pieces by Coleridge-Taylor that we wanted to record was a suite of compositions from *24 Negro Melodies*, which were originally for piano," Repper says. "But Coleridge-Taylor actually orchestrated five of them for an orchestra. About those he said—and this is going to butcher the quote—but basically he said, 'What Dvořák has done for the Bohemian, what Brahms has done for the Hungarian, what Grieg has done for the Norwegian, I want to do for the negro melodies.'

"The idea was to give these songs a renewed life, a permanent life. So I thought it was important to use Coleridge-Taylor's original orchestrations—the *Ballade*, the *Toussaint L'Ouverture,* with Curtis playing the violin—and to put them alongside Curtis Stewart's modern recompositions, presented in the modern style."

Taking this approach, Repper believes, fulfills Coleridge-Taylor's dream of having those pieces be permanent, and to continue with the reinvention that he himself brought to those melodies. "What's special about this album is that you get both of those things," he says. "One of Curtis' recompositions is the same melody as one of those five pieces that Coleridge-Taylor orchestrated, so you get back-to-back pictures separated by 120 years, but which come fundamentally from the same heart and soul."

Over the last two decades, Coleridge-Taylor's works have gradually been returning to the attention of the musical world, but the truth is that, given the fame he once earned and the sheer number of works he created during his short life, his music isn't often performed. Much of it fell out of publication within decades of his death.

With a goal of producing an album of music that had never before been recorded, Repper and his team were compelled to engage in a fairly high level of musical sleuthing. "We contacted Bournemouth Symphony, in England, which had performed some of his music when he was alive, and we reached out to a number of musicologists who've done work on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and little by little we managed to uncover enough material from enough places to put together an album," Repper says. "The *Ballade*—the concerto that Curtis plays beautifully—and the *5 Negro Melodies* had been uncovered by a pair of musicologists in England, Patrick Meadows and Lionel Harrison. They did a lot of work to reconstitute those pieces and come up with a useable performance edition, one that had never been performed until we did it for this recording."

> **"Coleridge-Taylor's music is both richly lyrical and very sweet at the same time."**
>
> *—Curtis Stewart*

Perhaps the most exciting element of this musicological search-and-find mission is that—now that a good number of the compositions are ready for publication—Repper and the National Philharmonic will soon be offering free, open-source performance editions of the music. "The goal is to have more and more music by Coleridge-Taylor available to download, to pay forward the legacy of this very important composer," Repper says. "Until now, there have only been a few available Coleridge-Taylor compositions written and ready for a full orchestra. We are working to greatly expand that, and this album is going to be a big part of it."

Asked to describe the unique challenges and delights of playing Coleridge-Taylor's works, Stewart begins with a warning that his answer would need to be reasonably technical. "There is a certain amount of chromatism that Coleridge-Taylor uses in higher positions on the instrument, and that requires these kinds of wormy motions in the left hand, in positions that we are not used to using, sort of weaving around with the fingers," he says. "The hand shapes don't fit the way they do if you're playing Bach. It's actually fun to play, because you have to develop this caterpillar sort of motion in the left hand, to maintain grace and power.

"Coleridge-Taylor was an amazing violinist himself," Stewart continues, "and he never asked his musicians to do something he wouldn't do himself, so even if he didn't play all of these on the stage himself, you know he played them a lot while composing them. With the *Ballade*, Op. 4, for violin and orchestra, I believe he conducted it for its premiere with the Bournemouth Symphony, which was the only time it's been performed."

Now that the album is ready to share with the world, Stewart looks back on the project as one of the most satisfying experiences he's had. As for the album itself, and the fact that it's coming out almost back-to-back with *Season of Change*, he admits he feels a deep sense of accomplishment.

"I'm sure someone will see some flaws in it, and that's fine," Stewart says. "I hope it's just flawed enough that someone will think they can do it better, because then there will be more recordings of Coleridge-Taylor's work, and more after that. Which is fantastic. That's the whole goal of this project: to make Samuel Coleridge-Taylor a household name by giving more people an opportunity to hear his music. And that's good—because it really is extraordinary." ■