



## Diskology: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The Clarinet Quintet & Nonet Piano Quintets by Giuseppe Martucci & Ottorino Respighi



**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (1875-1912) was born London, the product of a mixed race marriage, his father being an African from Sierra Leone and his mother a white Englishwoman. His musical talent showed itself early and he was admitted to study the violin at the Royal College of Music where he eventually concentrated on composition when his gifts were ascertained. On **Centaur CD 2691** we hear his **Clarinet Quintet in f#**

Readers may recall that I reviewed the **Piano Quintet in f minor** composed in 1902 by **Ottorino Respighi** (1879-1936) which appears on **Chandos CD# 9962** in Vol.XIV No.4 (Winter 2003) so I will not engage in any detailed discussion of it here. In a nutshell, I concluded that it is “*An extremely attractive work, it would be nice if professional groups would occasionally program something like this when a piano quintet is to be had rather than the inevitable Schumann or Dvorak.*” Those who have not purchased the Chandos CD may be interested in **Aura CD #416** because it is coupled with the **Piano Quintet in C Major, Op.45** by **Giuseppe Martucci** (1856-1909). A gifted pianist (his playing was said to be

admired by Liszt and Anton Rubenstein), conductor and teacher, Martucci, judging from the space allotted for his entry in *Cobbett’s Cyclopedic Survey*, was regarded as a fairly important composer of chamber music. Be that as it may, I have never heard any work of his performed live in concert. Perhaps the situation is different in Italy, though I rather doubt it given that Martucci spent much of his time trying to bring late German Romanticism to Italy’s sunny shores. But for the most part, the Italians were not interested in Brahms or Wagner and the like. Although Martucci’s name seems not to be entirely unknown, he has joined the ranks of those whose name rings a bell but whose music does not. The Piano Quintet is a fairly big work in four movements. The spirit of Brahms hovers over the marvelous, spacious opening *Allegro giusto* which in my opinion comes closer in mood to *affettuoso* than *giusto*. The leisurely opening theme is a lovely haunting melody which dominates the proceedings. The part writing is magnificent but one must admit that one would never guess this was music by an Italian composer. Much of what I wrote about the *Allegro giusto* could also be said of the second movement, *Andante con moto*. However, here we find a more vocal quality to the main theme, though, once again, it is not particularly Italian in nature. The third movement, a bustling *Scherzo, allegro vivace*, is more muscular and thrusting in nature but certainly is not harsh or rough. Though it does not sound like Schumann, nonetheless there are hints of that master’s influence in this very fluent and appealing music. The full-blooded finale, *Allegro con brio*, again sports the aura of Brahms, but oh how lovely this music is—there is no sense of mere imitation. The main theme is powerful and driving while the richly scored second theme sung by strings is some of the most gorgeous late-romantic music you will ever hear. This is an absolutely first rate work from start to finish. It goes without saying that it belongs on the stage and in concert halls. I don’t know if the parts are available but if they were, I would put my money down for them in a heartbeat. I can think of no reason why this music has remained in obscurity other than the fact that it is written by an Italian who took main stream German romanticism for his model. Here is a highly recommended CD.



**minor, Op.15** for the A clarinet, composed in 1895 as the result of a challenge issued by his composition teacher Sir Charles Stanford. After a performance of the Brahms clarinet quintet at the RAM, Stanford is reputed to have said that no composer could now write such a composition without escaping the influence of Brahms. Within 2 months, Coleridge-Taylor did just that and, in the process, had produced what is an undeniable masterpiece. Those who have heard or played it generally acknowledge it is as fine as either the Brahms or the Mozart clarinet quintets. That it has disappeared from the concert stage is unconscionable. In describing the piece, it could be said that if Dvorak had written a clarinet quintet, it might not have been far different from this. One especially hears the Czech composer’s influence in the lovely second movement, *Larghetto affettuoso*, which recalls the slow movement of the *New World Symphony* and the exciting finale *Allegro agitato*. There is no denying the rhythmic complexity, especially in the slow movement—and while on the whole the technical challenge may be of greater difficulty than the Brahms, it is by no means beyond experienced players. The parts are in print (*Musica Rara et.al.*) and every clarinet quintet party, professional and amateur, should make its acquaintance. The **Nonet, Op.2 in f minor** (Ob, Cln, Hn, Bsn, String Trio, Kb & Piano) was composed in 1894 and is no more a student work than his clarinet quintet. Also in four movements, the scoring along with the use of a piano, gives the work an orchestral sound. I can’t agree with the author of the jacket notes who found the opening *Allegro energico* to sound of Dvorak. The themes are spacious and lovely and sound of mid-19th century mainstream German romanticism, but they show little or no Slavic influence that I could hear. The second movement, *Andante con moto*, has a few minor flourishes that remind one of Dvorak but it would be a stretch to say the movement sounded Slavic. A striking and original *Scherzo-Allegro* follows. The use of string pizzicato is particularly telling. The finale, *Allegro vivace*, has a somewhat Tchaikovsky like introduction but the main theme erases any influence of it. A second theme sounds a bit like Elgar. The scoring is marvelous, so assured and deft that one realizes what a prodigy the 19 year old student must have been. A great work but one which because of the instrumental combination is unlikely to be played or heard by many of us. All the more reason to get this CD. Also on disk are his *Four African Dances* for violin and piano.