

Albert W. Ketélbey

There was a time when everyone knew at least some of the compositions of Albert W. Ketélbey - certainly *In a Monastery Garden* with its attendant birdsong, *In a Persian Market*, a potent evocation of the East, along with *In the Mystic Land of Egypt* and *In a Chinese Temple Garden*, the warmly romantic melodies of *Sanctuary of the Heart* and *Bells Across the Meadows*. Even today a great many people could whistle these tunes that have become a part of the language of popular light music without perhaps being able to put a name to them or tell you who their composer was.

The music of Ketélbey has lasted because it was well written and constructed, the fruit of a thorough musical education and wide experience in the commercial world of music. It was also a happy accident that Ketélbey's peak years as a composer coincided with the blossoming years of the silent film. When evocative music was badly needed by those who had to supplement the moving pictures with sound, there were all these eminently descriptive pieces ideal for the purpose. It is perhaps even fair to say that the music of Ketélbey was at that time heard to the point of surfeit. Today we can look back on it with just the right degree of familiarity and enjoy its sterling qualities.

The curious fact is that so little seems to have been written about Ketélbey, and what there is concerns the early years when he looked set for an academic career. As he became more famous through his music, he seems to have disappeared as a person and, of course, today many of the people who worked with him and knew him are gone. But it is easy to understand the silence, for we can readily assess the kind of person he was: a quiet man, a thoroughly professional man, concerned only with doing his task well whether composing, conducting or playing, and, to the end, unimpressed by fame and fortune.

Almost as soon as he had his first successes with works like *In a Monastery Garden* and *In a Persian Market*, he gladly accepted the opportunity to retire to a quiet and modest life on the Isle of Wight where he composed the numerous works which followed and spent the rest of his days. I met him there a few months before he died. We took some photographs which he kindly autographed but found it almost impossible to get him to talk about himself or his works. By now a decidedly stout, white-haired old gentleman with gold-rimmed glasses, he was most happy to reminisce about the old days in the theatre and

lavished praise on his old colleagues and fellow composers; but he still thought of writing an internationally known work like *In a Monastery Garden* as all in a day's work. Yes, he could have lived the grand life - but why, when he could live happily in the house he loved, working at his little Victorian writing-desk, enjoying his memories? He promised with kindly reluctance to write something about himself and his works, but sadly he died not long after the occasion and the promise was never fulfilled.

Ketélbey was born in Birmingham on August 4th, 1875, and some reference books tell us that his real name was William Aston. When or why he chose to become Albert W. Ketélbey remains obscure but it was certainly at an early stage in his career. He showed musical promise, particularly in composition, and studied in Birmingham under A. R. Gaul and Dr. Herbert Wareing. At the age of eleven he composed a piano sonata which was performed at Worcester and won the praise of Sir Edward Elgar. In an early scholarship competition, he triumphed over the young Gustav Holst for first place. At thirteen he won the Queen Victoria Scholarship to Trinity College, London, where he studied piano under G. E. Bambridge, harmony and composition under Dr. Gordon Saunders, also various instruments including the cello, clarinet, French horn, oboe and organ. The cello remained his favourite and in 1915 he listed playing the cello as a favourite hobby along with modern languages and playing billiards. He won assorted medals and prizes and while still a student had compositions published. Among them he wrote and performed a Caprice for Piano and Orchestra, a Concertstück for Piano and Orchestra, several quartets and a Quintet for Piano and Wind which won him the Sir Michael Costa prize. Orchestral pieces, piano pieces, songs, all came in profusion. At sixteen he was organist at St. John's Church, Wimbledon, and began to appear as piano soloist at Princes Hall, Queen's Hall and in such places as Birmingham and Eastbourne.

After four years as organist, he resigned to take up conducting. After touring for several years, he became the musical director at London's Vaudeville Theatre and his name can be found on the programmes of many productions there including the revues *Some* in 1916 and *Cheep* in 1917. A theatre career might well have been a possibility, for he had a comic opera *The Wonder Worker* produced at the Grand Theatre, Fulam, as early as 1900 and *A Good Time* or *Skipped by the Light of the Moon* was heard in 1896.

He had a success with *The Phantom Melody* written in 1912 which won a £50 prize offered for a cello solo by the celebrated cellist August Van Biene, and £100 in an *Evening News* song contest. Soon he became one of the busiest men in the music business. He was at various times

musical editor for Chappell & Co., musical editor for Hammond & Co., an examiner at Trinity College and musical director of the Columbia Gramophone Co.

Then came the successful vein of composition that was to allow Ketélbey to retire in his forties to the quiet house on the Isle of Wight and a life devoted to writing music and playing billiards. Ketélbey was very certain of his musical ideas. *In a Monastery Garden*, the earliest piece on this record, written in 1915, bears the title „characteristic intermezzo" and a description: „The first theme represents a poet's reverie in the quietude of the monastery garden amidst beautiful surroundings - the calm serene atmosphere - the leafy trees and the singing birds. The second theme in the minor, expresses the more 'personal' note of sadness, of appeal and contrition. Presently the monks are heard chanting the *Kyrie Eleison* (which should be sung by the orchestra) with the organ playing and the chapel-bell ringing. The first theme is now heard in a quieter manner as if it had become more ethereal and distant; the singing of the monks is again heard - it becomes louder and more insistent, bringing the piece to a conclusion in a glow of exultation." From which we might conclude that Albert W. Ketélbey was also an incurable romantic.

In a Persian Market, written in 1920, is an „intermezzo" scene which bears a similarly descriptive synopsis - the camel-drivers approaching, the cries of beggars, entry of beautiful princess (represented by a languorous theme given at first to clarinet and cello and then full orchestra)...She watches the jugglers and snake-charmers...The Caliph passes by interrupting the entertainment... All depart, their themes heard faintly in the distance, and the market-place becomes deserted.

The dates of the other works on this recording are: *In the Moonlight* - intermezzo (1919); *Chal Romano* - descriptive overture (1924); *Sanctuary of the Heart meditation religieuse* (1924); *In a Chinese Temple Garden* - oriental fantasy (1925); *Bells Across the Meadow* (1927); *The Clock and the Dresden Figures* (1930); and *In the Mystic Land of Egypt* (1931).

Ketélbey was a prolific writer who also worked under other names, notably Anton Vodorinski. He arranged his own pieces for various combinations including brass and military band and most of the well-known ones appeared also as songs for which he nearly always wrote his own words. Other transcribers supplied various instrumental arrangements. Finding, as we have said, that his music was in demand for use in "silent" cinemas, he wrote many pieces especially for this field - such as *Bacchanale de Montmartre*, specified for "cabaret, orgy and riotous Continental scenes".

Ketélbey was spiritually of the pre-war years, although he lived until

November 26, 1959. His memories were of conducting pantomime orchestras in the provinces, Charlot shows, working with Gertie Millar at the Vaudeville, and of the famous people he worked with in the Columbia studios. And, of course, his own music, written with such direct appeal for a wide public, which the world is now due to rediscover as immortal classics not only of their period but for all time.

PETER GAMMOND (1993, EMI Records Limited)