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IN A MONASTERY GARDEN

By Martin Cooper

I was a precocious pianist in a slapdash way, and I well remember the day – it must have been in 1913, I think – when the parlourmaid proudly placed before me a piece whose title was well suited to the clerical household of which we were both members.

On the cover was depicted the kind of herbaceous border which I have ever since been trying to reproduce in my own garden. Monks chanting, bells pealing, birds twittering ... it all appealed deeply to my romantic, Tractarian-coloured imagination.

Since those days I have not pursued my studies of Albert Ketelbey's music. I was not even conscious of being acquainted with it, until I receive from Decca a new long-playing disc (LK4080) which bore the proud title "The Immortal Works of Ketelbey".

This bears nine of the composer's best-loved pieces – genre pieces, they are, with the kind of titles that were attached to Royal Academy favourites in the nineties. And I found that eight were familiar to me.

"In a Monastery Garden", "Bells Across the Meadow", "The Ploughman Homeward Plods", and "Bank Holiday", are vignettes of the English scene "With Honour Crowned" is a stirring march.

"The Sanctuary of the Heart" is what earlier composers would have felt bound to call either "Priere" or "Song Without Words". Such was the success of this simple, affecting melody that the composer himself has in fact written words that "explain the significance of the principal melody".

Finally come three exotic pieces, "In the Mystic Land of Egypt", "In a Perisian Market" and "In a Chinese Temple Garden".

Folk music, they say, is dead. But the historian who examines the repertory of popular music played in England during the first half of the present century will have to reckon with Ketelbey.

His name is of Danish origin, his exact age a secret; but he was born in Birmingham, was something of a child prodigy and studied at the Trinity College of Music.

Elgar himself praised the workmanship of a very youthful piano sonata and Elgar's own music finds many echoes in Ketelbey's own – the stirring trio of "With Honour Crowned," with its poignant sevenths and the Gerontian calm with which "The Poughman Homeward Plods" opens.

"The Sanctuary of the Heart", too, for all its harking back to "The Lost Chord," is something like poor man's Elgar, but then on occasion so – as a wit might observe – is Elgar. Where Elgar writes his *nobilmente*, Ketelbey might prefer *religioso, con molto sentimento*, and both aim straight at the common man's solar plexus, on which both in their different ways score a bull's-eye.

The exotic pieces with their choral additions in outlandish language, bells, gongs and innocent "Orientalisms" are the musical equivalent of the Indian brass-ware and Birmingham-Japanese ornaments of old-fashioned apartments. They are naïve pieces of colour, the "folk" ornaments of an industrial civilisation which looks to an imagined East for relief from the drabness of everyday existence.

"Bank Holiday," with its subtitle "'Appy 'Ampstead," is a clever pot-pourri of popular songs put together with skill and presented with the gusto proper to the occasion.

Immortality is a large claim to make for any music. But these pieces persist in the public ear, they still fulfil their purpose; and not all of even the most superior music has lived as long.