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Pictures in Music,

An appreciation of Albert Ketelbey by William Neve

"In a Monastery Garden". "In a Persian Market". If these titles mean anything at all to you perhaps they recall happy seaside holidays when the band played on the pier, or the trio in the palm-court. The younger generation may not know the name of Ketelbey who wrote these and many other descriptive pieces. Yet hum a few bars and perhaps they exclaim: 'Oh, yes, they played it for the old silent films, didn't they?' And they would be right, more than they realize: for he was the man who made pictures in music.

Albert William Ketelbey was born in Birmingham on 9th August 1875. It would have caused him wry amusement to know that he would be remembered solely for his religious meditations, oriental phantasies, and the like. The child prodigy who played his own piano sonata to the admiring Elgar at the age of twelve, who a year later gained a scholarship to Trinity College of Music, London – beating Holst – always hoped he might be regarded as a serious composer. In this he received no encouragement, so reluctantly he 'slaughtered his innocents', as he put it, and turned the slow movement of an unpublished string quartet into 'In a Monastery Garden', published in 1915. For many years he had been conducting in West End theatres where he found ample opportunity to write background music for plays, revues and pantomime. Soon he turned this facility to providing for the growing needs of the silent screen, under the pseudonym of 'William Aston'.

A visit to Chilworth Friary, near Guildford, provided the idea for 'In a Monastery Garden'. The tune from the string quartet now suggested, so the synopsis said, 'a poet's reverie amidst beatific surroundings'. Various deft touches were added to indicate 'birds singing, monks chanting, the organ playing and the chapel bell tolling'. The world fame which came to him at the age of fifty amazed him. The piece was constantly requested by war-battered soldiers in military hospitals and it was a favourite of George V and Queen Mary. Perhaps these two factors contributed to its early success.

By the 1920s a million copies, with the romantic picture on the cover, were to be found on the music-desks of pianos throughout the world. 'In a Persian Market', 'Sanctuary of the Heart' and 'Bells across the Meadow' became equally popular, and were recorded in every possible arrangement. He became musical director for the Columbia Gramophone Co. where he conducted his own orchestra. In spite of every effort on his part to arouse interest in his larger works, the public had put their label on him: Ketelbey was the man who wrote that tuneful, descriptive music. You knew what it was all about.

What sort of man was it who achieved such fame? Lively, dapper Mr 'K' was liked and respected in the profession; genial, yet little disposed to talk about his private affairs. His first wife, Charlotte Lewis, came of a larger, close-knit family, who took him

immediately to their heart. As they had no children of their own, Aunt Lottie and Uncle Albert made much of their nephews and nieces. Clifford Curzon, the renowned concert pianist, is a nephew by marriage.

Every Sunday morning there were family gatherings at the Ketelbey's Hampstead home and a fancy dress party on New Year's Eve. On the latter occasions a few musical friends might be invited, but Ketelbey preferred the intimacy of the family of his adoption, making no effort to cultivate the right people. Everybody was expected to have a party piece to perform and their host took no exception to the popular Stanley Holloway monologue, 'Albert and the Lion'. There would be plenty of Paul Joneses and Ketelbey would lead the conga at the end of the evening. He might ask the little band of old colleagues that he employed year after year to make a foxtrot out of 'Persian Market'. Yet he had a thorough dislike for any jazzing of the classics, such as the mal-treatment of Mozart's 'In an Eighteenth Century Drawing-Room', which was popular at the time.

By middle age he had, as he himself put it, acquired 'fame and fortune in a monastery garden'. He enjoyed travelling, and with his natural gift for languages, was able to converse with artists and audiences abroad, where he was frequently asked to conduct such famous orchestras as the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam. Early in his career he put an accent on his name, which was of remote Scandinavian origin, to ensure that the stress was put in the right place. (He hated being called Kettleby.) It had the added advantage of giving it a foreign appearance in the days when home-grown music found little favour. Great was his amusement when an oriental gentleman referred to him as 'Ket-el-Bey' – an honorific title to which he made no claim, in spite of writing 'In the Mystic Land of Egypt'.

He was determined to retain his hard won independence so that he might devote himself to more serious composition. Perhaps he was haunted by the memory of 'the innocents' he had slaughtered, but publishers and recording companies urged him to persist in writing in the facile vein he had discovered. He had acquired a label which was to stick to him, however much he hoped to remove it. Year after year he turned out pieces in the same genre: 'In a Chinese Temple Garden' and a host of others, now forgotten. His ability to write melodies of instant appeal was generally acknowledged, but not everybody realised his skill in orchestration developed through years of practical experience, since he could play several instruments. Too often his works were performed by inferior café bands, few of whom approached the standard of Albert Sandler and his Trio.

During the dreadful winter of 1946-47 his home was flooded when a rising main burst one night. He and Charlotte, now both in their seventies, became seriously ill after trying to salvage his valuable library of books and scores. She died and for a while he suffered a breakdown. After a period of living in hotels, to which he was ill suited, he married a lady from the Isle of Wight, where he finally settled. He would emerge sometimes to conduct performances of his works, not perhaps with the brio of his youth, but never allowing his slow movements to become too sentimental. His audiences were

now older, yet just as enthusiastic, as were the performers, and not only because it was drinks all round afterwards at his expense. To those less fortunate than himself he was always generous; apart from giving private help, he contributed handsomely to the Musician's Benevolent Fund.

With some reluctance he appeared with Eric Robinson on his television programme 'Music for You'. The Pickwickian old gentleman was quite able to hold his own. 'Are you still composing?' he was asked, with some condescension. 'Oh, yes,' came the swift retort, 'I'm not going to decompose yet.' His death at the age of eighty-four, in 1959, passed with scant attention in the press, and few people attended his cremation at Golders Green. The incongruity of brides asking for 'In a Monastery Garden' to be played at weddings used to make him chuckle. A wry smile might have come to his lips had he known his coffin passed out of sight to its strains. He had so many other pieces he wanted to be heard.