

LIGHT MUSIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER 19, Autumn 2002

KETELBEY AND THE STRING QUARTET, by Tom McCanna

Nick Barnard's article in *Newsletter 18* on the string quartet as a medium for light music made reference to Albert W. Ketèlbey's quartet writing.

There was an early quartet which seems to have been written in the second half of 1896. On one occasion this was apparently played by the Sammons Quartet at the Aeolian Hall, though I haven't been able to check this. [see below] Bosworth's catalogue for 1949-50 mentioned a *Phantasy* for string quartet lasting 16 minutes, available for hire; this may well have been the same work, as many of the "new" works appearing from about 1937 onwards were in fact earlier works being recycled. The copyright was not assigned to Bosworth, and their Howard Friend was unable to locate this hire material, even before the Heddon Street premises were stripped and abandoned.

The story linking *In a Monastery Garden* to a lost string quartet probably stems from an article by William Neve in *The Lady*, 21 August 1973:

"[Ketèlbey] "slaughtered his innocents" as he put it, and turned the slow movement of a string quartet into *In a Monastery Garden*"

This appears to be a misreading of an earlier article, which had appeared in the *Radio Times* of 4th September 1931:

"He began as a more serious composer - with a Caprice for Pianoforte and Orchestra, a String Quartet, a Quintet for Pianoforte and Woodwind, etc. Finding no market for these and other works, he tried the experiment of taking their melodious "second subjects", dressing them up with variations, and trying them on the publishers. In this way he "murdered his innocents" (as he puts it) with great success: the slow movement from a String Quartet made an admirable background for a river-scene in a music-hall sketch... *In a Monastery Garden* was commissioned for performance at a seaside resort..."

The most likely candidate for this river-scene would be *A River Rêverie*, which also saw service as the lovers' music in *Wildhawk*. The texture has moving inner parts suggestive of quartet part-writing. The former was recorded for piano on Marco Polo 8.223699, while the latter is due to be re-issued in an orchestral version in the Naxos Historical series.

Nick Barnard's suggestion that Ketèlbey played the violin is not confirmed by any source that I know. He made recordings as pianist, organist and conductor, and while a student dabbled in the cello, oboe, clarinet and horn. A number of simple mandoline pieces also dating from his student days suggest that he knew the bare essentials of that instrument but not much more. However, his brother Harold was a professional violinist, and it was to him that Albert dedicated his most advanced violin solo, *Mélodie Plaintive*.

If anyone can throw more light on the quartets, or provide the original source of Ketèlbey's remark about "murdering his innocents", I would be delighted to hear from them.

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MORE ON KETELBEY AND THE STRING QUARTET

There is now a version of *The Times* newspaper 1785-1985 available on a website which allows the whole text to be searched. (Sorry, I think it's only available on subscription). If you search under "Ketelbey", the very first entries give details of his lost **Phantasy Quartet**, which I discussed in *Newsletter 19*.

The work was first performed on 18th November 1915 at the Aeolian Hall, London, by the London String Quartet (Albert Sammons, Thomas W. Petre, H. Waldo Warner and C. Warwick-Evans). The following day, page 5 of *The Times* had this report:

The new work produced by the London String Quartet at the fourth of their "Popular" concerts at Aeolian Hall last night was a Phantasy for String Quartet by Mr. Albert W. Ketelbey. It includes two moods, *andante* and *vivace leggiero e fantastico*, in a single movement, and the ideas are woven together with considerable skill. It contains moments of real inventive power, particularly in the latter part. The *andante*, however, is so much built upon a theme in successions of whole tones harmonized with augmented triads and their derivatives as to become tedious. Nothing can be more tedious than this thoroughly exploited mannerism.

The composer himself must have realised the limitations of the idiom. Apart from the **Vignettes for Piano** which became **Three Fanciful Etchings** (see *Newsletter 17*) and the incidental music to the play **Ye Gods** (including the intermezzo **Wonga**, recording to be re-issued on Naxos Historical), he never again wrote extended sections of whole-tone music.