

## THE MAN BEHIND THE RECORDS

ALBERT W. KETÈLBEY

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By "Allegro."

Scene: Recording Room of the Columbia Graphophone Company.

Actors: Mr Albert W Ketèleby the Company's Musical Director. The recording orchestra, and a certain popular but eccentric comedian with his stage partner.

Recording apparatus, etc., in trim to start operations.

Mr Ketèlbey (brightly to popular comedian): "Now, Mr J \_\_\_\_\_, we're all ready to begin, if you are".

Popular Comedian (fixing a ruminative eye on the ceiling): "H'm, ah, yes!"  
(Pause, then to his stage partner) – "Shall we do our new patter in the song, dearie, or just do it the old way?"

"Dearie": "Whichever way you like."

Popular Comedian: "H'm, ah, yes!" (Another pause, then to Mr Ketèlbey) – "I think we'll do the patter in our new way."

Mr Ketèlbey (slightly less brightly): "Very well. How long do you want for it?"

Popular Comedian (after ruminating for a longer pause): "Three minutes".

Mr Ketèlbey: "Very good. We'll start now."

Popular Comedian: "No, don't start yet." (Another long pause for rumination). "I don't think we'll do the patter the new way, - we'll do it our old way."

Mr Ketèlbey (still less brightly): "Very well. How long do you want for it the old way?"

Popular Comedian (after a still longer pause for rumination, and involved mental calculation): "Two minutes."

Mr Ketèlbey: "Very well, Mr J \_\_\_\_\_. We'll start now, if you please."  
(Taps his desk, and signs to the orchestra).

Popular Comedian: "No, we won't start yet." (A longer pause than ever.) "I don't think we'll do anything at all this morning. I don't feel like it."

Mr Ketèlbey (*sotto voce*): !!! xxx !!! xxx.

The Popular Comedian retires gracefully with his partner, with a parting smile of serene benevolence.

## THE MUSIC MIRROR JUNE - 1921

This little scene is intended to convey some idea of the trials and tribulations that beset the path of the conductor responsible for the production of gramophone records with orchestra. It is a perfectly true description of an actual occurrence not so very long ago. Fortunately this sort of thing does not happen every day; if it did, the man behind the records would very quickly be reduced to a state of nervous prostration. But though a wasted morning of the kind described above is a rare event, there are endless other difficulties that have to be overcome before the "master" record of a star performer is judged it to be reproduced in its thousands for dissemination to the gramophone public.

Of the host of people who listen to and enjoy records at will in the comfort of their own homes, probably very few give a thought to a wonderful industry that goes to the making of the records.

It is an industry that gives employment to an army of workers, and covers a multitude of departments of varying importance. Of all its great departments that which is concerned with the actual professional recording of a performer or performance is by far the most responsible, and of that responsibility the lion's share rests upon the shoulders of the conductor who "takes command" in the recording room. It is he who must visualise the record in the making as it will sound on the finished product in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Balham; his ears must be attuned to detect the slightest error or blemish, either on the part of orchestra or artists, for he knows that any error or imperfection will be caught by the sensitive recording apparatus, "shown up," and possibly intensified on the finished record.

While actually directing the performance himself, he must constitute himself the audience as well and listen as the ultimate buyer of the records will listen, only a hundred times more keenly. He pits his sensitive musician's ear against the sensitiveness of the recording apparatus, and it says much for the power of the human element that he is very rarely deceived.

As Musical Director of the Columbia Company, Mr Albert W Ketèlbey is undoubtedly the right man in the right place. A musician of vast experience even in those early days when the gramophone was more a torture than a blessing, he has followed the fortunes of the recording industry for many years, and has been identified with the Columbia Company practically from the first. He can justly claim to have played a very large part in the steady improvement that has gone on from year to year in the quality of records, and the public undoubtedly owe him a debt of gratitude for having brought the performances of the Columbia records to the high level of artistic merit that characterises them today. A man of charming courtesy, polished manners, infinite tact, and exceptional patience, he is endowed with four attributes which are eminently desirable in the sometimes highly charged atmosphere of the gramophone recording room – the two latter in particular. He has a facile method of conducting (doubtless acquired from his long experience as musical director of theatre orchestras of all sized and characters – the finest of all practical schools for conducting), which inspires respect from his men and confidence from the soloists.

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It must be borne in mind that when conducting an orchestra during the period that the recording apparatus is actually at work the conductor must not utter a sound, or that would also be recorded. His reading of a work must be purely and simply expressed by the baton, he must make the force of his personality felt in absolute silence. At an orchestral concert it is permissible for a conductor to tap his desk, and even to give directions to his men in an undertone that may or may not be audible to the audience, but in the recording room such things are strictly forbidden.

Mr Ketèlbey started his musical career as something of an infant prodigy. At the age of 13 he came from Birmingham to London as winner of the Trinity College Queen Victoria Scholarship for composition. This scholarship was tenable for three years, at the end of which time he was again victorious in the same competition, which entitled him to a further term of three years' training. During this time he studied the piano, the organ, and various orchestral instruments, including the 'cello and French horn. He also wrote a number of pianoforte pieces and songs, which were actually published during his student days. For four years he held the post of organist at St. John's Church, Wimbledon, during which time he composed a considerable amount of church music, including a prize anthem. At the end of this period, seeking fresh fields to conquer he was appointed conductor of a light opera company. In this new sphere he made good to such an extent that he was commissioned to compose and conduct the music for a musical comedy at the old Opera Comique in the Strand. Even at this stage of solid achievement he was still practically on the threshold of life, for he was only 22, and possessed the distinction of being the youngest theatrical conductor in London.

In connection with his first engagement as theatrical conductor those who maintain that the art of conducting an orchestra can only be acquired after much long instruction and laborious effort will be interested to know that Mr Ketèlbey launched out as professional orchestral conductor without any previous instruction or experience in that capacity. A certain musical comedy manager offered him the post of conductor of his orchestra. "But I don't know anything about conducting," said Mr Ketèlbey.

"Never mind about that," replied his prospective chief, "You'll soon find out how." And he did – with brilliant success. Of course, his musical training and inherent talent stood him in good stead in his unaccustomed capacity, but I doubt if many even accomplished musicians could come out with such flying colours if suddenly called upon to professionally conduct an orchestra for the first time in their lives when so young in years as Mr Ketèlbey was at that time. But certain musicians accomplished in all other respects, can never make conductors no matter how they strive. It is all a question of temperament, and natural facility. Since his early venture Mr Ketèlbey has conducted for many years in London and the provinces, and has acted as musical director of various West end theatres, including the Adelphi, the Garrick, the Shaftsbury, the Playhouse and latterly the Vaudeville.

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As a composer Mr Ketèlbey has an enviable reputation for music of a richly tuneful and not too involved character, but that he can be as fantastic and futuristic as any of the ultra moderns I can vouch for after being privileged to hear him play one of his published pianoforte compositions which he wrote under a pseudonym, to use his own words, "as a joke on the modernist cult." The music is intended to convey an impression of a factory town by night, and it is undoubtedly highly "impressionistic." Reverting to his more normal works, Mr Ketèlbey seems to have made a hobby of winning prizes. In addition to the prize anthem previously referred to, he won a prize of £100 offered by *The Evening News* some years ago for a song, and also carried off a prize of £50 for a piece called "The Phantom Melody", which was written for Van Biene, the famous actor-'cellist. In his early days he also gained a prize for an intermezzo for orchestra. He may be said to have carved a particular niche for himself in the musical scheme of things by his descriptive pieces, in which he has a style quite distinct from his other works. A lot of descriptive pieces are written in the course of years, but not a lot succeed in convincing by their descriptive material. Mr Ketèlbey, however, has had a peculiar success in this class of composition, and his work, "In a Monastery Garden," to name only one, had been one of the most popular numbers of its kind ever written. His output of pianoforte and instrumental pieces, songs, and music for theatrical productions has been considerable, among his best known songs being "I Call You from the Shadows," "My Heart a Dream," and "Keep Your Toys, Little Laddie Boy." As a writer of more ambitious works he has also achieved a great deal. One of his earliest serious works, a 'Quintet for Wood-wind and Piano', gained the Sir Michael Costa prize and gold medal, while other notable works which have been publicly performed on many occasions are 'Concerstück for Piano and Orchestra', 'Caprice for Piano and Orchestra', 'Suite for Orchestra', 'Overture for Orchestra', and 'String Quartette'. In music of a serious trend alone these works represent a very considerable total, but his compositions of a more popular nature, of course, far outnumber them, and it is naturally enough as a writer of popular music for the people that he is most widely known. Even the above long story does not exhaust the chief features of Mr Ketèlbey's manifold activities. He is an examiner for Trinity College of Music, and Musical Editor and Reviser for two prominent music-publishing houses. In his spare time – when he has any – he plays golf.