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SPECIAL FEATURE on ALBERT KETÈLBey

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Full name: Albert William Ketèlbey {Ketelbey}

Birth: 9th August 1875 (Birmingham. England)

Death: 26th November 1959 - Isle of Wight, England

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Albert Ketèlbey was an English composer, conductor and pianist - AND an occasional cellist! - who is best known for his short pieces of light orchestral music.

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He was born in Birmingham and showed a natural talent for the piano and singing, and he became head chorister at St Silas' Church in nearby Lozells. At the age of eleven Ketèlbey joined the Birmingham and Midland Institute School of Music, now the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. At the age of thirteen Ketèlbey composed his first serious piece of music, "Sonata for Pianoforte" which his biographer Tom McCanna said "*shows a precocious mastery of composition*". In all he studied piano, organ, cello, clarinet, oboe and horn - however it is said that CELLO was his favourite instrument!!

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He moved to London in 1889 to further his study at Trinity College of Music. It was a brilliant studentship - imagine, even Gustav Holst came second to him! He composed a Caprice for piano and orchestra, a Concertstück for piano and orchestra, a quintet for piano and wind, a Dramatic Overture, a Suite de Ballet and at least one String Quartet plus Polish Dances and two sets of Studies for examinations at Trinity College.

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However, he did not pursue the brilliant classical career predicted for him, but became musical director of the Vaudeville Theatre whilst gaining experience as a composer of light music and also as a conductor of his own works. The legend (and I believe it to be true!) goes that his creative genius was turned towards lighter music when the popular cellist August van Biene offered in 1912 a prize of £50 for a cello solo that could equal the amazing popularity of his own 'Broken Melody'. Ketèlbey, a cellist himself as we have seen, successfully offered his "Phantom Melody" to win! Besides Phantom Melody he composed another cello solo, "My Lady Brocade". I would love to get copies of both of these pieces!

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For many years after leaving conservatoire Ketèlbey worked 'artistically' for a series of music publishers, including Chappell & Co and the Columbia Graphophone Company, making arrangements for smaller orchestras, a marvellous learning period in which he learned to write fluent and popular music. He also found great success writing music for silent films until the advent of talking films in the late 1920s.

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The composer's early works in conventional classical style were also well received, but it was for his light orchestral pieces that he became best known. In 1914 Ketèlbey wrote the orchestral work 'In a Monastery Garden', which was published in the following year both as a piano piece and in full orchestral form. It was his first major success, his most famous piece, and became known all over the world, what we would now call a mega-success. It sold over one million copies and brought him to widespread notice. Suddenly his depictions of exotic scenes set to music caught the public imagination and established his fortune. Such works as *In a Persian Market* (1920), *In a Chinese Temple Garden* (1923), and *In the Mystic Land of Egypt* (1931) all became best-sellers in print and on records.

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Such was Ketèlbey's popularity that by 1924 his works could be heard several times EVERY day in restaurants and cinemas, and in that year the Lyons tea shops spent a massive £150,000 (for that era!) on playing his music in their outlets. His celebrations of British scenes were equally popular: examples include the *Cockney Suite* (1924) with its scenes of London life, and varying commissions for ceremonial music for royal family events. His success was so gigantic that by the late 1920s he became Britain's first millionaire composer!

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His works were so frequently recorded between the two World Wars, and this period can be considered his 'heyday'. By the early 1930s over 1,500 broadcasts of his work were made on BBC Radio in ONE year and additionally more than another 700 on European radio stations, including a weekly Sunday programme of his music sponsored by Decca Records on Radio Luxembourg.

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However, in the course of musical history the careers of many fine composers have seen to be distorted by events outside their hands. Ketèlbey simply could not maintain the status of being a “number one” composer...the truth is that his popularity began to wane even during the Second World War itself as musical tastes suddenly changed - the same circumstances happened to many previous generation composers in and after World War I too. With the emergence of a newer generation of classical composers his originality in comparison to them was also considered to be in decline. On top of that, many of his early post-war works were, in reality, re-workings of older pieces and he increasingly found himself and his music ignored by the BBC - we have to remember that it was such an important institution for classical and popular music, especially in the decade post-World War II.

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Added to all this, the winter of 1946-47 was exceptionally harsh, and in February the sub-zero temperatures burst the water main outside Ketèlbey's Hampstead home. With his house partially flooded, he lost most of his correspondence, manuscripts and papers and worse, both he and his wife both contracted pneumonia. The couple were taken to the Regent's Park Nursing Home, where his wife Lottie died just two days later. Poor Albert suffered a nervous breakdown, although in his recovery he entered another relationship. In 1949, after a new marriage, the couple decided to move to the Isle of Wight (off England's south coast), to spend their retirement. He still composed occasionally, but the tragedy is that he died at home in almost obscurity.

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Luckily for posterity his work has been re-appraised quite favourably since his death; up to the point that in a 2003 poll by the BBC radio programme Your Hundred Best Tunes, “Bells Across the Meadows” was voted the 36th most popular tune of all time. A substantial part of his output has been issued on new CDs in more recent years.

In summing uphe was such an interesting figure - and charmingly related to the Cello world! Please remember his name!

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‘documenting the cello’

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