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Birmingham's Unknown Musical Genius

Acclaimed as a leading composer but forgotten in his home town **Christopher Morley** discovers more about Albert Ketelbey.

Never has the saying about a prophet being without honour in his own country more true than in the case of Albert Ketelbey.

Born in Aston exactly three-quarters through the 19th century, and acclaimed during the 1920's as the country's most popular native composer, the talent that created *In a Monastery Garden*, *In a Persian Market*, *Bells across the Meadow*, *Sanctuary of the Heart* and so many other well-loved miniatures continues to go unnoticed in the city of his birth.

A blue plaque marking the site of 41 Alma Street, Aston Manor, where Ketelbey came into the world on August 9th, 1875 is conspicuous by its absence, local Ketelbey biographer John Sant, born just around the corner in Gerrard Street, 73 years after his idol, is determined to redress the balance.

"I discovered Ketelbey's music in 1971, going through LPs," Sant tells me over a drink in the Old Joint Stock in Temple Row. "I bought this LP of his music; I was fascinated by the titles, I suppose! I played the LP and became even more fascinated with the music.

And later I discovered that he was born in Alma Street, just over the road from where my mother was born and around the corner from where I was born, so really that intensified my interest in him.

There were no books written about the man, so I just sort of gathered any snippets about him from newspapers and magazines."

Early retirement enabled John Sant to decide to undertake further research.

"I went up to the library, and within a month I just got hooked on it. I began in 1997, and I finished the research work in January last year. Then it took about five months to get from manuscript to finished book, basically."

John Sant's book on Ketelbey in some way goes against the wishes of the composer's will, which expressed the hope that no biography would be written. Many of Ketelbey's papers and manuscripts were destroyed in a domestic flood in 1947, and yet more seem to have been destroyed by his youngest sister Caroline, who died in 1990.

"I think Ketelbey was proud of his Birmingham roots. He always said he was a Brummie by birth and Cockney by adoption (Ketelbey spent many of his most productive years in Hampstead before retiring to the Isle of Wight).

"But he had this fall-out with his father, who wanted him to pursue a career in classical music.

When Albert diverted from that, in 1915 well, before that, when he went into theatre while he was still a student, to try and earn a few bob on the side, but when in 1915 he published *Phantom Melody* as the start of his light music work, that certainly created a rift with his father, who, after all he'd spent on him, wanted him to pursue a career in serious music. Then when he married Lottie, who was an actress as well as Jewish, that seemed to intensify this rift still further, which extended to all his brothers and sisters still in Birmingham.

When you look at wills and other papers within the family, he's totally excluded, there is no mention, with the exception of Caroline, he maintained contact with her until 1959, the year he died.²

One wonders what Ketelbey senior had to complain about, when his son (who at the age of 13 had beaten the slightly older Gostay Holst to a Trinity College composition scholarship) was hailed in the *Performing Rights Gazette* of October 1929 as "Britain's greatest living composer". This was judged on the basis of sales and royalties, at a time when Elgar, Master of the King's Music since 1924, was apparently broke.

But the critics sided with the older Ketelbey, decidedly sniffy about the nature of Albert's compositions overlooking the craftsmanship, style, melodic and harmonic elegance which characterise them. And so he remains unacknowledged in Birmingham, though, with a conductor now at the helm of the CBSO passionate about exploring byways of 20th century English music, one wonders whether some Ketelbey items might grace a few of the orchestra's lighter programmes.

Certainly this city which has attracted so many great composers to its splendid Town Hall during the heady years of the Triennial Festival – Mendelssohn, Gomm, Dvorak, Grieg and Sibelius among them, has a need of a created genius to call its own Elgar belongs to Worcester, Bantock to wherever will claim him (though his influence in Birmingham is immense). We have John Joubert today, but his modest man deserves acclaim as South Africa's greatest composer.

Birmingham should be proud to proclaim that the composer of some of the world's most frequently heard light classics was born within the sound of the bells of Aston Parish Church (which became a fingerprint of his compositions) and give Albert Ketelbey his rightful due.

John Sant's book on Ketelby *From the Sanctuary of his Heart*, is available from Oakstone Classics, Symphony Hall, and from Manifold Publishing (0121 353 4473).