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THE MUSIC MAN

Brum Forgets a Home-grown Genius Whose Melodies Still Linger On....

His tunes tinkle on – but who remembers the man who wrote them, Albert W Ketelbey, born Birmingham, 1875?

Who did I say? Albert Ketelbey, the composer of "In a Persian Market", "Sanctuary of the Heart" and "In a Monastery Garden".

Ah, I thought so! The music strikes a chord – even perhaps among the under 30 age group.

For generations these melodies rang round the world.

Within a few years of its composition, "In a Monastery Garden" had sold 1,000,000 copies – and was being played in countless front parlours.

It was everyone's favourite party piece on every seaside pier, at every park brass-band concert, on cinema organs around the globe.

Tattered

And I am confident there will still be a few, tattered, gummed-together copies taken out of piano stools for an airing this Christmas.

Yet Ketelbey, the would-be serious composer who finally found fame with his romantic picture-book pieces, enjoys no memorial in Birmingham, the city of his birth.

Has Birmingham left it too late to pay tribute to its most successful musical son – in this, the centenary year of his birth?

There are statues and plaques to other of the city's historic figures – the Priestleys, Watts, Masons, Lloyds and Chamberlains.

The shy composer, however, stays unrecognised – Birmingham's forgotten genius of melody.

It remains a sorry thought to the faithful who still pay tribute to the pleasures Ketelbey gave – and still gives.

Shrine

To Mr Harold B Jones, of Hall Green, who recalls his first acquaintance with "In a Persian Market" – "played" he says, "as an accompaniment to an adventure serial at the old Lyric Cinema when I was only five or six.!

"They will still be playing Ketelbey's music long after The Beatles are forgotten," says Mr Jones, "yet they have made a shrine out of the place where The Beatles started. Why can't Brum do something for Alfred Ketelbey?"

Then there is Mr W Onn, of Gallaways Road, Shipston-on-Stour, who still plays his 50-year-old 78 rpm records of Ketelbey favourites.

"They were conducted by the composer with his own concert orchestra," Mr Onn says. "They are a bit scratched now but I am thinking of putting them on tape."

Mr Onn, who is 65 also feels Ketelbey's tunes (the composer used to refer comically to them as "my chunes") will live on.

"Surely Birmingham has musicians – perhaps an amateur orchestra – who could give a concert tribute to the composer?" he suggests.

So the music parlour piano-players loved lives on.

Yet Ketelbey's early days remain something of a mystery. Does anyone know where he was born?

Prizes

The Rev. I F Jarvis, Vicar of St Silas's, Lozells, confirms that young Albert sang solos in the choir there as a child, but he has found no record of it. Nor of his address.

Old newspaper cuttings refer to the home of this quiet, retiring man as being in Aston – or Handsworth.

He was a student at the Birmingham School of Music, but, at 12, won a composition scholarship to Trinity College, London.

There he swept up a handful of prizes and, at 16, was organist at St John's, Wimbledon, London.

At 22, Ketelbey was the musical director of a West End theatre, and his fame is reported variously to have begun either by writing the "Phantom Melody" for the popular cellist, Van Biene, or with "In a Monastery Garden", composed for a friend who had an orchestra playing at the seaside.

Ketelbey, a musical prodigy, composed serious-vein material which was regarded as having some quality.

A sonata for piano, written at the age of seven and played in Worcester, earned the praise of Edward Elgar.

But, alas, no one remembers his quintet for woodwind and piano or his "Concertstück", but there are still a lot of people who can hum or whistle a few bars from "Monastery Garden" – like the chant of the monks, or the birds' song, or recall the cry of "Baksheesh, backsheesh, Allah from "Persian Market".