

BELLS ACROSS THE MEADOWS OF GOZO?

Little is known of the genesis of Ketèlbey's well-loved piece, *Bells across the Meadows*. The earliest copyright date is 1921, and a copy of the piano version was deposited in the British Museum on 4th April of that year. The plate number shows that the orchestral version was published simultaneously with the piano version. As with so many of the composer's works, these are the only hard facts we have.

The actual title was borrowed from a recent song by Liza Lehmann, words by Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall, which had been published as part of the cycle *Hips and Haws* in 1913.

John Sant's biography *Albert W. Ketèlbey 1875-1959: From the Sanctuary of his Heart*, contains an anecdote on page 55:

One Marie Haddleton "believed his inspiration for this piece went back to his childhood memories of the pealing bells of Aston Parish Church... Marie's grandmother had been told of this early inspiration behind the famous piece"

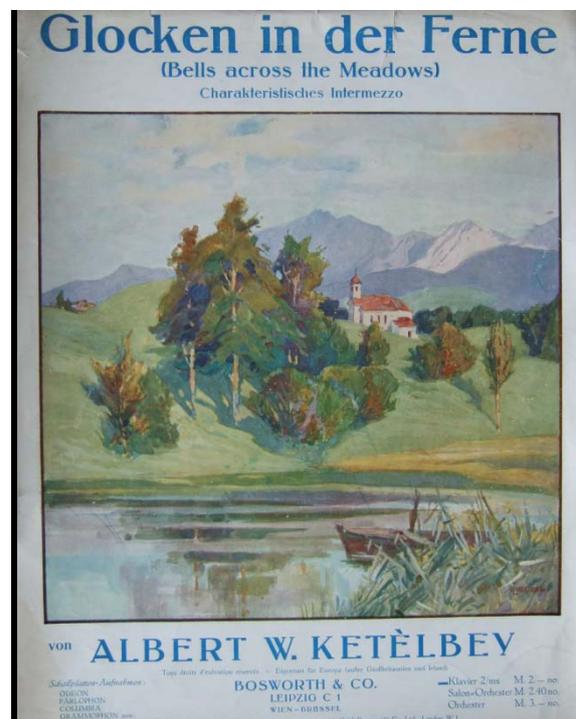
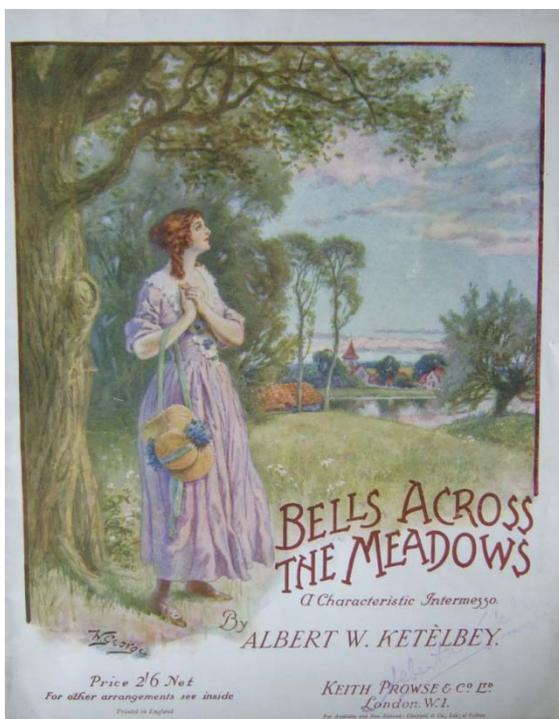
An article in *The Islander* in April 1991 records an interview with Wilf Dorrington, the composer's chauffeur. He recalls conversations made over 30 years earlier about events 30 years before that:

"When a piece of music was commissioned, Ketèlbey wrote *Bells across the Meadows*, which his client rejected, saying it had no future. Not convinced, the composer persuaded the conductor of a Bournemouth orchestra to include it in a programme, and its success was instantaneous".

Neither story can be given total credence after such a lapse of time, though there may well be much truth in Dorrington's story. Certainly Ketèlbey enjoyed a close relationship with Dan Godfrey, conductor of the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra, who as we shall see had a personal interest in this piece.

This work was the first of Ketèlbey's to be published by the small firm of Keith Prowse & Co. Ltd. Why should he have moved from Bosworth & Co. Ltd., who had already published several of his pieces, and as a larger firm was spending more on advertising? The most likely guess is that Keith Prowse offered a fee above the going rate.

Another possibility is that the composer was less than satisfied with the two-tone illustration Bosworth had just provided for *In a Persian Market*, whereas the cover W. George designed for Keith Prowse's edition of *Bells across the Meadows* is quite stunning - just the thing to catch the customer's eye in a sheet-music shop. Ironically, Bosworth's eventually acquired the continental rights to the piece, and their Viennese branch issued *Glocken in der Ferne* with an attractive Austrian landscape illustrated on the cover.



An alternative account of the origins of the work is current on the Maltese island of Gozo. Here is a typical version, found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgGNn96MJpY

“Ketèlbey was inspired and moved, one silent evening when he was somewhere in GOZO, MALTA and all of a sudden he heard the bells of Ta’ Pinu church ring. He was so moved that he composed here, where he was stationed as a musician, a tribute to Gozitan bells. The original manuscript of *Bells Across the Meadows*, as written down by Ketèlbey himself of course, is still kept in the musical archives at the Aurora Opera House Gozo. For more details you can click the website leone.org.mt/pages/teatru.asp”

When I was recently in Malta, I took the opportunity to inspect this manuscript material, which consists of parts for wind band. It appears to be a copy in an unknown hand of the arrangement made by Dan Godfrey for military band, and published by Boosey and Hawkes in 1923 as *Q.M.B. Edition No.81*. I did not have the full published set with me to make a detailed comparison, but enough details in the scoring were identical to confirm this. The names of the instruments are mainly in Italian, though the Bell part is in English, as is the Conductor. This latter does differ from the present Conductor part, and I wonder whether my 3-stave version is a later expansion of an original 2-stave version. The caption title runs “Bells across the Meadow / Ketèlbey”. The set also contains later additional parts in other hands, with the title given correctly as plural “meadows”.

When could Ketèlbey have come to Gozo? As we have no autobiography or personal diaries, tracing his movements is almost impossible. Writing in the December 1926 issue of *The Musical Times*, he states “I was recently in the East (or very near it).” As the East is often understood by British people to start at Tangiers, it is possible that he was on a Mediterranean cruise, which might well have included a visit to the Maltese islands.

A lost work called *Taormina* had its copyright assigned to Bosworth’s in September 1924. Taormina? A seaside resort on the east coast of Sicily, only 138 miles from Gozo. The name lacks resonance for the British public, so could it have been inspired by a personal visit?

It is unlikely Ketèlbey could have come to Gozo much earlier than these dates, since before 1925 he surely could neither have afforded a cruise nor had the time off his work as musical director at the Columbia record company. The details I have at hand from the diary of the Columbia recording studio suggest he may have been absent from recording duties in October 1925-January 1926. Before that, the previous lengthy gap is early 1922, but details this early are incomplete.

In 1927, the composer himself also added words to the music to form a song.

“While the sun is setting,
All our cares forgetting,
Comes the sound of evening bells,
Far across the lea and dells,
Peace to all the message tells,
From above;

Hearts with joy are singing,
While the bells are ringing,
Though the shades of evening fall,
And the day’s beyond recall,
Night will bring content to all,
Peace and love.”

Does the music itself give any clues to the source of inspiration? As with many of his descriptive pieces, the composer analysed the music in a short synopsis, which was included in the notes to his 1928 recording:

“The Intermezzo opens with bells (solo) then the strings and wood wind play a quiet melody, which on being repeated has a chimes effect introduced with it, as if heard from a distant belfry across the meadows. After a middle section in the dominant during which other bells are heard, the first part is resumed, this time with melody in the 'cellos, and soft chimes intermingling. This leads to a loud repetition of the principal theme with bells ringing out joyously and then gradually dying away in the distance.”

This is fairly vague, with no mention even of the time of day, but the bell part itself offers more specific clues. Although the orchestral part mentions glockenspiel as an alternative, the instrument intended was a set of tubular bells with a diatonic scale of Eb major. This key was also handy for the *1812 Overture*, which of course needs a bell effect during the coda. The success of *Bells across the Meadows* must have greatly promoted the sale of tubular bells – has any other bell piece been played as frequently?

Bells across the Meadows.
CHARACTERISTIC INTERMEZZO.

Orchestra by the Composer. Timpani Eb-Bb.
Large Bells Scale of Eb. ALBERT W. KETÉLBÉY.

Moderato
Large Bells (or Glock.)
(with piano.)
p Solo.

Tym.
p

Bells.
f a tempo

Bells Solo.
p *pp*

Più mosso.
Bells.
poco rit. a tempo

Tempo I.
a tempo rit. *p* Solo. *mf*

ff

3 Joyfully.
ff accel.

dim. e rall. *p* *dying away* *pp* Fine

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The bell part can be analysed as follows:

- Bar 1-6. Suggestive of a clock chiming 3 o'clock. This is particularly clear when the piano obligé part is used to add colour to the bells. This piano part was only added to the orchestral set at a late date, but the notes themselves are identical to the piano solo version which was cognate with the orchestral version in 1921. The three-note figures for the quarters use bells in G – F – Eb, with the piano adding the colour of high discordant harmonics. The same Eb bell is used for the hour chime, but it is differentiated by the piano's low accompaniment.
- Bar 19-22. Counter-figure based on the first four notes of the Westminster chimes, which is quoted exactly in 20 & 22
- Bar 23-26. Doubles melody, in the manner of a carillon
- Bar 30-32. Opening figure reduced to half length
- Bar 33-44. Random off-beats for bells in Bb, G and F
- Bar 45-48. Doubles melody, which is harmonised in parallel motion to suggest bells
- Bar 49. Three repeated notes, reminiscent of the Sanctus bell used in Catholic masses and in some high-church Anglican communion services
- Bar 50-69. As 19-26
- Bar 73-74. Full descending scales
- Bar 75-76 Variant of quarter chime figure
- Bar 77-78. Bb – Eb repeated
- Bar 78. Full descending scale (not in the original orchestral part).

Some of these figures suggest a British source of inspiration. The Westminster chimes have been used in various clock towers around the country. British church bells, with their full-circle ringing mechanism, characteristically play descending scales. This is impossible on continental bells, including those of Malta, where the clapper is controlled

directly by the bell rope. There, each bell proceeds at its own pace, with little co-ordination between ringers. The off-beat passage and the single pitch of the Sanctus bell are more typical of their capabilities.

Thus the piece is based around several bell patterns, some of which are characteristically British, though others could be continental or even Maltese.

So returning to the Gozo story I quoted above, we can dispute many details:

- "one evening". Perhaps 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The idea of evening could have originated from the song version, which was an afterthought by several years.

- "he was somewhere in Gozo". Maybe he did come to Gozo, but unlikely as early as 1921, when the piece first appeared.

- "Ta' Pinu church". The church wasn't completed until 1932, and its bell-tower two years later. A variant story names a different Gozo church, the one at Santa Lucija. The four bells currently there were apparently cast in 1948 and retuned in the 1990s, and are therefore irrelevant. As an example of how Gozitan bells are played, these can be heard at www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyW8Yc-2-Es

- "stationed". This implies a posting in the armed forces, which Ketelbey never served in. One role that the composer was still fulfilling in the early 1920s was examiner for Trinity College of Music. Did they send British examiners to the colonies at that time?

- "across the meadows". There's no way an Englishman brought up near the lush pastures of Warwickshire would use the word "meadows" for the terraces covered with walled vegetable patches which make up most of the rural landscape both on Gozo and on Malta.

- "tribute to Gozitan bells". More likely a tribute to bells in general and British bells in particular.

- "original manuscript". A copy of someone else's arrangement.

My guess is that a set of the published Boosey & Hawkes arrangement reached Malta with a British service band, and that this was copied by hand by a local musician. The name Cordina has been mentioned, though I haven't been able to follow this up. One could well imagine that a town band based in a small colony would have found the five shilling price tag outside its budget.

I would be delighted to hear from anyone who can shed any more light on this puzzling subject.

This article has been prepared with the kind assistance of Peter Deverill, Oliver Friggieri, John Sant, Emmy Vella (archivist at the Aurora Opera House) and Paul Xuereb. It is slightly revised from one published in the *Light Music Society Magazine no.57*, Autumn 2012.

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