

## LIGHT MUSIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER 26, Summer 2004

### **KETELBEY'S OWN RECORDINGS OF *IN A MONASTERY GARDEN*, by Tom McCanna**

Few composers can have recorded their works as many times as Ketèlbey's seven versions of *In a Monastery Garden*. A study of them not only gives insight into his interpretation, which may be of interest to modern conductors, but also reflects developments in the history of the recording industry.

The two earliest recordings were issued without mentioning the composer's participation, but as he was currently working as musical director for Columbia Graphophone, it is highly unlikely that he was not responsible for them.

Before discussing the recordings, here is a reminder about the structure of the piece, using terms from the composer's synopsis, which appeared on some imprints of the piano solo music:

Bar 1-16, F major, Reverie

Bar 17-32, D minor, Sadness

Bar 33-48, F major, First Reprise of Reverie

Bar 49-64, C major, Kyrie (with chanting)

Bar 65-80, F major, Ethereal Reprise of Reverie

Bar 80-88, F major, Coda (with chanting)

There are two first-hand accounts of the origins of the work, one by the composer himself writing in 1926, the other by Brother Edgar Larway in 1959. There is also a detailed account dating from 1940 by Herbert C. Ridout, a colleague of Ketèlbey at Columbia. I summarised these accounts in my notes to Marco Polo CD 8.223699.

These accounts all overlook the first publication of the work, on a cheap 10-inch Regal record, G 6688 (matrix 28803), issued in May 1914, under the title "In a Monastery Garden, with monks chanting &c." played by the Regal Orchestra. As was normal in the early days of acoustic recording, a very small ensemble was used, in which the only instruments to be identified in the murk are violin, flute, 2 cornets, trombone, and bells. The male chorus sings in unison, and is tacet in the coda. The orchestration is completely different from the standard parts, which were not published until the following year - for instance the flute plays semiquavers in the first 8 bars. To keep the work within the 3 minutes' limit of a 10-inch side, the Sadness and First Reprise sections are cut. In common with other early Columbia recordings, no playing speed is indicated on the label. At 78 rpm, the piece sounds a quarter-tone flat by modern standards, so 80 rpm could well be preferable.

The following year, the music was deemed worthy of a full-price recording on a 12-inch record, Columbia 564 (matrix 6525), issued in September 1915. This time the orchestra was named as the Court Symphony Orchestra, Columbia's house orchestra in London. The orchestra plays from the published parts, with minor variations; oboe, bassoon, trombones, and timpani are omitted, while a tuba replaces the string bass.

The men's chorus divides into three parts, and after the initial Kyries moves on to sing "Christe eleison". With the extra playing time of one minute, only 8 bars need be cut, from the Sadness section. As with the earlier recording, a speed of 80 rpm gives a better result.

According to the Columbia archives, this recording was replaced by one made on 30th September 1924, with matrix 6525-4. This was probably because the earlier matrix had become worn. Unfortunately, the new recording was issued with the same manufacturer's

number, and the matrix number probably appeared as simply 6525, making it visually indistinguishable from the earlier record. I have only managed to hear one of these two takes, which I assume to be the one from 1915.

Ketèlbey had by now made a song out of the piece, setting two stanzas of his own verse. An introduction of two bars was added, the Sadness and First Reprise cut, and two further bars added before the Ethereal Reprise. This song version was recorded by the tenor Hubert Eisdell on 18th July 1922, and issued on Columbia 12-inch L 1454 (matrix 75157) in December 1922. The label specifies a playing speed of 80rpm, and at this speed the song sounds in A flat. This is a semitone higher than the highest pitch of the published music, but corresponds exactly to the later song recording (see below). The orchestra includes flute, clarinet, cornet, tuba, bell and violin, but other instruments are indistinct. The chorus sings in harmony.

One significant feature is the new independent instrumental bass line added to the Kyrie. This section provides a problem for conductors, for in the published orchestral parts the harmony is almost entirely in parallel triads. Without an organ, these chords are in root position (bass line on bassoon doubling the melody), but the organ part has lower notes making them first inversion. The new bass line is used in both recordings of the song, but appears nowhere else either in recordings or published music.

In 1925 Columbia began recording with microphones, and systematically worked through their catalogue replacing the old acoustic recordings with new electric ones. Columbia 564 was replaced by 564R, which makes no mention of a conductor. Though one might guess that Ketèlbey would again be conducting his own composition, in fact the studio logbook shows that this record was conducted by Albert Leggett.

Hubert Eisdell was summoned back to re-record the song on 9th February 1928. The 12-inch Columbia record 9381 (matrix AX 3240) was issued in June 1928. On the earliest pressings the label omitted to state that the work was conducted by the composer, but this was later corrected. The new recording process allows more of the orchestra to be identified, and instruments to be heard include flute, oboe, clarinet, timpani, bell, harp, and a full string section probably including 2 double basses. For some reason the singer replaces the phrase "closing in the West" with "closing on the West".

When Ketèlbey was planning to retire from Columbia to live off his earnings as a composer, the company honoured him with two monumental sets, each of eight records. As well as his popular pieces, these included a selection of his more serious works. All have now been re-issued on CD in the Naxos Historical series.

*In a Monastery Garden* was spread over two 12-inch sides on Columbia 9403 (matrix AX 3107, 3108), recorded on 11th November 1927, and issued in July 1928. The original label gives the artists as "Albert W. Ketelbey's Concert Orchestra conducted by the composer (with vocal effects)". These vocal effects were none other than the well-known contralto, Nellie Walker, and a full mixed chorus. The lack of accent on the composer's name was typical of contemporary record labels. This version has been re-issued on Naxos CD, 8.110870.

As in the contemporary recording of *Sanctuary of the Heart* (re-issued on Naxos 8.110848), a small-scale work is inflated into something far grander, ending fortissimo with a full mixed chorus. This recording combines the orchestral and song versions, with the soloist singing stanza 1 at the First Reprise and stanza 2 at the Ethereal Reprise. To help use up the extra time allowed by two sides, an additional 8 bars are added before the sung Kyrie, with the organ and bells playing the first Kyrie phrases as an introduction. Although the orchestra

plays from the published parts, there is an additional harp part, while the accompaniment in the First Reprise is reduced to flute, clarinet, harp and strings.

The final recording was issued in November 1940, as part of a set of four Decca 10-inch records. This set was perhaps intended to make the composer's work available in a cheaper form than the Columbia sets, but being issued during wartime, few copies can have been manufactured or sold, and they are now quite rare.

*In a Monastery Garden* is on Decca F 7615, with the artists named as "Albert W. Ketèlbey and his Concert Orchestra, with male chorus". The orchestra omits cornets, trombones and timpani, but there is an organ, and also hyperactive bird-song at places not indicated in the part. An unidentified light baritone sings just two lines during the Ethereal Reprise. As with the first 10-inch recording, 32 bars are cut, but this time they consist of 8 bars from each section except the opening Reverie and the Coda. The recording sounds a quarter-tone sharp, probably on account of the organ.

I have left a summary of tempi in these six recordings till last. The printed marking of crotchet = 76 for the main melody is the median speed used, but most recordings start slower, with the Ethereal Reprise a notch faster. The Kyrie also has a median speed of 76, usually slightly faster than the preceding section. When it is included, the Sadness section is considerably faster, anything from 80 to 100, while the Coda is always a notch slower than the Ethereal Reprise. The extremes of tempo come in Columbia 9403, where the possible 8 minutes' playing time allow slow speeds of around 66-69, and Decca F 7615, where for no apparent reason the main sections come out between 80 and 84. In general, the music is played with far more rubato than is marked in the parts.

All these variants from the same interpreter confirm that he had no single definitive version in mind. This is commercial music, written to earn the composer a living. The proliferation of diverse versions for different performing media all added to his income. At least 140 recordings of the piece have been made over the years, not only by standard ensembles and solo artists such as orchestras, military bands, brass bands, pianists, organists and singers, but also by banjo and mandolin ensembles, handbell groups, fairground organ, Hawaiian guitar, musical saw, theremin, male voice choir, whistlers, and even a cage full of canaries singing to an orchestral accompaniment. A friend of mine once heard Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod, use the piece to demonstrate the ondes martenot, though this didn't reach the recording studio.

When Ketèlbey made an appearance on television at the age of 77, the version of *In a Monastery Garden* chosen for the programme was actually a new arrangement by Arthur Wilkinson for large orchestra - a final blessing on diversity.

.