

## KETÈLBEY'S SYMPHONIC METAMORPHOSES

Tom McCanna

The music of Albert W. Ketèlbey did not become popular until the early 1920s, when the composer was already in his late forties. Consequently, by the time publishers realised he was hot property, he already had a large number of suitable pieces ready for re-publication. In particular, Hammond, who had been his main publisher since the 1890s, re-issued many of his earlier piano works.

But there was a demand for substantial new orchestral pieces, and the composer produced two suites from recycled material. In a **Lovers' Garden** (recorded on Chandos FBCD 2002) is an orchestration of five songs which had been published by Asherberg, Hopwood and Crew, including the prize-winning **My Heart Still Clings to You**. The finale, **The Garden Fête**, a heavy-footed waltz, had been the delicate coloratura song **Fairy Butterfly**, written for Florence Smithson in 1915 (recording in preparation on Naxos Historical 8.110848).

In 1927, the suite **Three Fanciful Etchings** was first performed in Bournemouth, and the composer's own recording has now been re-issued on Naxos Historical 8.110174. With its scoring for a normal-sized symphony orchestra with double woodwind, nine brass, percussion, harp, celesta and strings, the set of parts was the largest for any Ketèlbey work, and the publisher Bosworth also produced a full score. This is the only such example in the composer's oeuvre, and as all the copies I have seen bear the composer's inscription, my suspicion is that this luxury was produced at his own expense.

The origins of this suite have only recently been rediscovered. In 1916, the composer had **Six Vignettes** for piano published by Hammond, under the pseudonym Anton Vodorinski. Three of these are fairly accessible, with copies in the British Library and elsewhere: **Sur le Volga=On the Volga**, **Les Pèlerins=The Pilgrims** and **Chant des Orphelins**. Rosemary Tuck included them in her CD on Marco Polo 8.223700.

The other three pieces, **Nuages qui Passent...**, **Papillon Bleu** and **La Brume**, have been much more difficult to trace, and when

eventually I located copies now belonging to the composer's great-niece, it became clear why. They had been re-used in **Three Fanciful Etchings**, but as they were Hammond publications, they would have had to be withdrawn from sale when the copyright for the new versions was assigned to Bosworth.

The first movement of the suite **A Passing Storm-Cloud on a Summer Day**, is a straight orchestration of **Nuages qui Passent**, although the middle section has been transposed a fifth lower. The finale, **Quips and Cranks, and Wanton Wiles**, has a section based on **Papillon Bleu**, with the rhythm changed to 6/8 (ex.1 & 2). Unlike **Fairy Butterfly**, this metamorphosed butterfly remains ethereal.

The transformation which overcame **La Brume** is quite amazing. The original piece has the subtitle "Repretation d'une ville industrielle, a la nuit", and the following synopsis: "The distant beat of heavy hammers – A curl of smoky vapour rises and falls – The curls of vapour become more frequent – A ruddy glow from the furnace plays on the vapours – Several clouds of smoke mingle – The smoke clouds become blacker – The smoke, the beating of hammers, and the throb of industry all become merged in a general mist – The noise begins to die down – Various clocks begin to chime, some near, some distant – Quietude reigns – The picture repeats itself ad infinitum".

In an interview published in 1920, the composer described this as a "joke on the modernist cult". Apart from a very few bars as the clocks chime, discords involving semitones or augmented fourths and fifths are always present, with an absent key signature symbolising the apparent lack of tonality. A grinding left-hand ostinato accompaniment figure and one short melodic phrase in the right-hand (ex. 3) are repeated with minimalist variation, ending with a precursor of the fade-out.

From this uncompromising townscape came the rural idyll described in **The Ploughman Plods his Weary Way**. "The piece represents the ploughman plodding along in an autumnal twilight; after a time his steps become slightly intermittent and he starts to whistle a short phrase softly to himself; he rests a while and contemplates the

scene in a reflective mood. He resumes his homeward journey, whistling his little tune occasionally, and gradually begins to slow up as he reaches home."

The repetitive left-hand figure of example 3 is now revealed to have been a second inversion Bb major chord with added sixths and sevenths, and with a little adjustment sounds opulent in its new scoring for 4 horns and 2 bassoons (ex. 4). Above this the composer adds a new melody for strings in octaves (ex. 5). The melodic right-hand of example 3 appears with simpler harmonies as in example 6. A variant of this figure occurs in identical notes in each work, in **La Brume** at the fortissimo climax, in **The Ploughman** as a quiet cadential figure (ex. 7).

So a piece describing a smoky, impersonal, unrelenting industrial scene possibly in France became an elegiac setting in the English countryside probably swathed in clean autumnal mist, with a single labourer having finished for the day. An amazing achievement in humanising and cleaning up the environment!

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The image displays seven musical examples, labeled Ex. 1 through Ex. 7, arranged in a vertical sequence. Each example consists of one or two staves of music. Ex. 1, titled 'Vivare', shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. Ex. 2, titled 'Presto', also shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. Ex. 3, titled 'Moderato con moto', shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. Ex. 4 shows a bass line in the bass clef with a dynamic marking of 'p'. Ex. 5 shows a melody in the treble clef. Ex. 6, titled '(transposed)', shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. Ex. 7 shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef with a dynamic marking of 'p'.