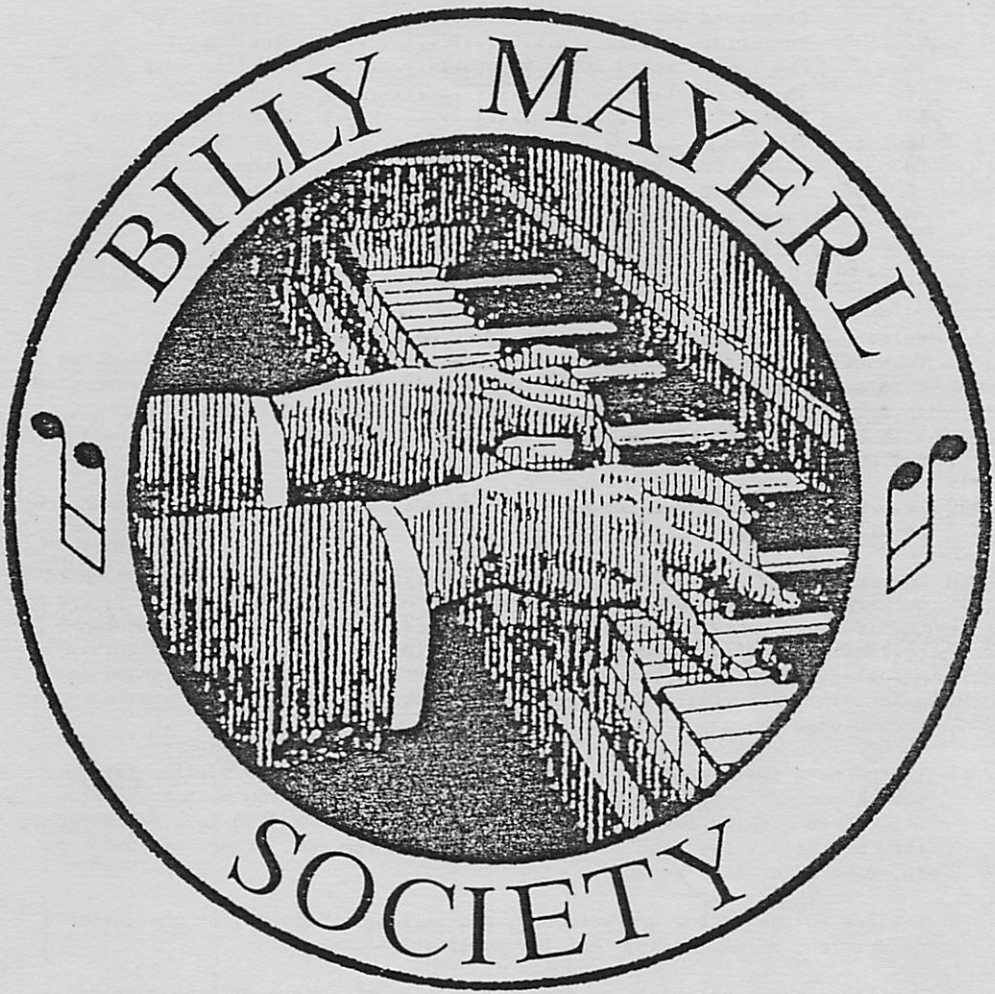

No.1

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Welcome to this first issue of the Billy Mayerl Society Magazine. We want to make this very much your magazine, so we welcome contributions of all kinds; articles, letters, suggestions, whatever. Opinions expressed in articles are those of the writer of the article, so if you disagree with an expressed view, or would like to expand on a point raised, please put pen on paper and send it to me.

We are particularly keen to hear from anyone who has any personal reminiscences of Billy to communicate.

Our Archivist, John Smith, L.R.A.M., has asked me to mention that he would be very interested to hear from anyone who has original material. We are particularly grateful to those who have already donated articles to the collection, and welcome all offers, as we intend to build up as complete a collection of Billy-oriented items as possible. As well as printed and manuscript music, we are interested in recordings, especially tapes of broadcasts.

In the next issue we plan to have a 'For Sale and Wanted' section for the use of members. So if you have some surplus material you wish to dispose of, or are looking for a swap, or need something to add to your collection, send us the details, and we will publish them for you. There is no charge to members for this service.

Letters to the editor are welcomed, and will be published, at the editor's discretion, unless marked 'not for publication'.

Completed cross solutions to the editor, please. There will be a prize for the first correct one drawn out of the hat at the meeting on August 7.

Editor: Mike Harth
Typesetting: Kathy Lorenzini
Layout: Mike Lorenzini

The editor wishes to thank all who have contributed to this issue, and particularly John Watson for his help with the illustrations.

Susan Tomes at the Wigmore Hall

I arrived at the Wigmore Hall about forty-five minutes early, and listened with pleasure to Susan warming up on the Steinway piano - an unexpected bonus. She has abundant natural musicianship. Her sound-world is always a delight and there seems to me to be a natural articulation in her playing that comes from an inner understanding of the music.

Mozart's Sonata in B flat, K.570, was a model of style. Susan's second item was the first performance of Judith Weir's 'The King of France', a work firmly based in tonality and expertly written. The composer, who was present in the auditorium, is lucky to have such an eloquent exponent.

The first half concluded with three Faure Nocturnes (Opus 33, Nos, 1 & 3, and Opus 33, No. 8). Judging from the performance, Faure is a composer with whom Susan feels a special affinity. Opus 33, No. 3 always gives me a bit of a problem: having got used to Rubinstein's interpretation, I find it difficult to tolerate anyone else's: however, I enjoyed Susan's interpretation only marginally less. (Dinu Lipatti's performance of Ravel's Alborada del Gracioso gives me a similar problem.)

The recital ended with Schubert's Sonata in A, D.959. I lost all track of time whilst this was being played. The work, I believe, is supposed to last about forty minutes - it seemed more like ten minutes to me. I remember a similar experience while listening to the first performance of John Taverner's 'Protecting Neil'. My only slight reservation was in the second movement, which I thought possibly needed a touch more projection and masculine strength to bring out the full force of Schubert's unprecedented impassioned outburst.

It is probably rather unfair to expect a performer to give encores when they have been on an odyssey such as the Schubert sonata: nonetheless, we were treated to three. The first was very brief - was it one of Faure's Pieces Breves ?

The second was Billy's Antiquary, a lot slower than the composers's own performance, but I preferred it this way. It was controlled, and had a degree of freedom within a rigid framework - I believe this is an essential quality for these fast rhythmic pieces. The composer's own performance, I think, has just reached the stage where it is beginning to go out of control. (I imagine at this stage I'd better add that I believe that at his best nobody's playing could reach Billy's own standard.)

The final encore was Zez Confrey's 'Kitten on the Keys' - at a similar speed to the composer's, and again I preferred Susan's interpretation. The composer's own performance I find by comparison a bit mechanical.

In all it was a memorable evening.

What Went Wrong ?

The one album of Billy's music currently in print is called 'The Jazz Master'. Even though that is the title of the first of Billy's compositions to, so to speak, hit the headlines, it seems a singularly inappropriate choice today, because whatever category Billy's music falls into, it certainly is not jazz.

In the early twenties, though, it is doubtful if there was any clear distinction made between ragtime, which is the style from which novelty piano sprang, and therefore the tradition Billy was working in, and jazz proper. With hindsight, there seems little difficulty in deciding into which category any particular piece of music-composition falls: what we are more likely to puzzle over is why the one died out and the other continued developing.

To a large extent, I suspect that the problem with the novelty style was that it was so fully developed there was nowhere further for it to go. Jazz, by contrast, was such a vaguely defined entity, and had such a loose framework, that it was capable of going in many directions, some of them united by little more than the fact that the line of progression can be seen without too much difficulty.

Beethoven developed sonata form to the point where a new approach was necessary to achieve anything really vital in the medium, and though of course many minor composers went on writing sonatas, without adding anything of significance to the concept, or the store of music, it wasn't until Liszt re-thought and re-shaped the whole idea of sonata form in his B minor sonata that it was given a genuinely new lease of life. Billy's tragedy was that, after he had achieved a peak of excellence in novelty writing that no-one else equalled or was ever likely to equal, there was no younger composer around of anything like sufficient genius to lead it onto a new path: thus it died away for lack of nourishment.

It was also essentially a piano form, and as the piano became less popular and less universal with the continual increase and improvements in recording techniques and the popularity of recordings, so did interest in the style wane. Nowadays we find it slightly amazing that there was a market in, for instance, selections from musical comedies played on the piano - Billy himself recorded a fair number of these, as did many other top pianists of the day. In our time, the pre-eminence of the pianist has been usurped by singers, a substitution that I, for one, bitterly regret, especially as with it has come a much more exaggerated cult of personality, and we now appear to be in an era where the talent of the singer, if any, is much less important than the promotional techniques used to put him or her over.

It seems unlikely that the piano, at least in its acoustic form, will ever again achieve the pre-eminence it had in those days. To judge from his contributions to the magazine, Billy seems to have laboured under the impression that anyone who had taken his course was ipso facto a capable player. No doubt if all his instructions were carefully followed and the student attended diligently to his practice, this would have been so, but a little knowledge of human nature convinces us that there would have been a considerable percentage of students not so conscientious. There are of course professional pianists today who play as well as the professionals of the twenties and thirties, if nor so many of them, but the average level has declined sharply.

Depressing evidence of this is given by the difficulty level of piano music intended to appeal to the generality of players. Billy transcribed his own number 'I'm At Your Service' in two versions, a 'simple' and a 'difficult'. The 'simple' version would most certainly qualify as difficult by today's standards, when a simple version means mainly single notes in the two hands, and not too many of them.

One has only to look at the sixpenny potpourris -obviously published, at that price, for some sort of mass market - which contain octaves and tenths in the left-hand part and full chords in the right-hand, not to mention other features such as breaks in fourths, to appreciate how high the general amateur level was.

The novelty didn't die out immediately. what happened was that a blander, mainly orchestral, idiom superseded the more lively style of the twenties and thirties, but it produced little of lasting interest and was eventually edged out by the rise of the teenage market and its concomitant pop groups. With these, the musical element, such as it is, has receded further and further into the background until now the most important elements in their success are the promotional videos, the image they present, and whatever gimmicks their manager can dream up. Light music, as such, has practically died.

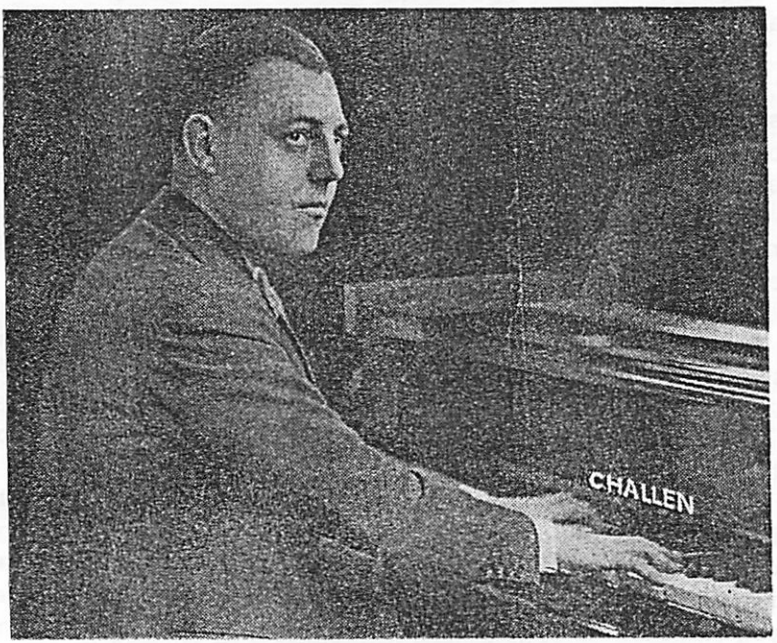
We still have jazz. I don't find this any consolation. Without doubt the various idioms of jazz have enriched the general musical vocabulary - there is obvious jazz influence, for instance, in one of Billy's masterpieces, Honky Tonk - but jazz itself is a back-alley down which I, for one, feel no urge to wander. Really it is a performance art, and as such exists mainly to show off the virtuosity of its exponents.

There is a close analogy in classical music: the sets of variations turned out in their thousands by good and bad composers alike, most of which were some sort of re-hashing of a number of technical tricks, in the same way as jazz performers apply their bag of tricks to melodies of the present. time: the finer the player, the fuller the bag, but the basic formula itself suffers from the fact that most of us would rather hear a good tune than someone using it as a basis

for messing around. Even a composer like Brahms could fall into this trap: his Variations on the St. Anthony Chorale suffer from the fact that the tune is more attractive than most of the variations.

Billy's attitude to this sort of thing is one which I imagine most of us would share. In his notes to his transcription of 'Say It', he writes : 'Here is yet another slow number of the melodious type, but with plenty of scope for fast treatment later on without any possibility of ruining the melody.' This by itself is sufficient to distinguish his style from jazz arrangers, since 'ruining the melody' is usually the last thing they worry about.

I am not personally a nostalgist.: I don't enjoy looking back at, or wallowing in, the past for its own sake. If there was a current school of music which had developed from novelty piano, I'd be the first to embrace it. Unfortunately we have no option but to turn to the past because the present is barren. Still, I suppose it's not so different from the position in the classical field, where the vast bulk of the current repertoire is made up from the music of past eras, with contemporary works written by living composers appealing only to a small minority. One wonders whether, if a composer of genius appeared who wanted to work in the light music field, he'd even be able to get published.



Lunchtime Chabrier Centenary Recital : Purcell Room 10/2/94

Roy Howat is a formidable pianist - the memory of the coda of the Chopin Barcarolle in his previous Purcell Room recital still lingers with me, there was the very soul of Chopin.

He was at the piano throughout this Chabrier recital, playing solos, accompanying baritone Henry Herford, and playing two-piano works with his wife Wendy Hiscocks - a gifted composer as well as pianist. She, incidentally, has an impeccable pedigree: her grandfather collected Mayerl's piano solos as they were published. What could Roy do but marry her !

The piano solos were three pieces from the Pieces Pittoresques, Paysage, Sous-Bois, and Improvisation, followed by Caprice and Feuillet d'Album.

In my record collection I have a boxed set of three records on t he Vox label containing the complete piano music of Chabrier - solo, duet and two pianos. Though I found the music very pleasant, it didn't set the Thames on fire for me. The pianist's playing of the Scherzo-Valse, a favourite Rubinstein encore, when compared to the latter sounds a bit like uninspired Czerny. Roy's playing made me appreciate to the full Chabrier's great originality and his immense charm.

The songs were Les Cigales, Ballade des Gros Dindons, Lied, Sommation Irrespectueuse, Les Yeux Bleus, and L'Ile Heureuse. I was particularly impressed by the singer's stage presence.

The concert ended with the Trois Valses Romantiques for two pianos. Roy and Wendy should be congratulated on their unanimity: they brought out to the full the charm of these delightful pieces. The sound from Roy's piano, which looked smaller but I believe wasn't in fact so, carried a bit more than Wendy's - at least to where I was sitting, (about the middle of the hall.) It seemed a pity that a few people had to miss this delightful ending because the concert over-ran by about ten minutes.

I understand that there are plans for Roy to record Chabrier on CD. Please let's have the complete piano works: they should fit nicely on two discs and would make a perfect Christmas present.

HOW I DISCOVERED BILLY MAYERL by Philip Legg

I've been asked (or should that be bullied!) by the Editor to write the first in a projected series describing how we all stumbled across dear old BM. For me personally, it was around 1974 when my Great Aunt died leaving us a pianola in her will. Typically it wasn't working, so over the next few weeks my dad painstakingly renovated it. Finally winning his battle the great day came and we all sat down to hear the two rolls he had bought. 'My Future Just Passed', incidentally also recorded by Billy Mayerl in his 'Safety in Numbers' selection, and a piece called 'Marigold'. "You'll like this one", he said as he sat down to pump the pedals. He wasn't wrong. It was simply the best tune I'd ever heard and from the moment it started to the moment it finished I sat there totally captivated and couldn't wait to hear it again. I must have played that roll over a hundred times by now, which interestingly enough has an eight bar minor section in the middle which I have not heard anywhere else. (It also appears to be a four-handed arrangement but isn't the well-known BM version.)

The next two rolls we bought were 'Hollyhock' and an excellent selection from 'Love Lies' which includes Mayerl's 'A House On A Hill Top'. I wanted to find out more about this Billy Mayerl so I asked my dad where he'd heard of him and he told me that when he was a boy Billy Mayerl used to be on the radio all the time and he'd written lots of things. That Christmas I got my now treasured LP 'The King of Syncopation'. Incredible stuff but to my horror on listening to the first track I realised I'd been pedalling my roll of Marigold at half-speed! (Or was Mayerl playing it just a bit too fast?)

By now I'd created a hobby which a lot of us are guilty of, i.e rummaging in record shops for anything with Billy Mayerl written on it. I was then lucky enough to discover a copy of the Neovox Billy Mayerl 75th anniversary cassette. Virtually all break-neck speed stuff. The 'Versatility' album followed but commercially, as far as I was aware, that was basically it. (At this time I didn't even know about the brilliant Richard Rodney Bennett LP.)

A few uneventful years passed with by no more records or rolls on the horizon when one Saturday afternoon my parents came back from Chichester market and my mum handed me a plastic bag and said enthusiastically, "we bought all that the man at the market had." Not knowing what on earth she was talking about I looked in the bag and to my delight found it full of Billy Mayerl Club Magazines. For those who don't know these always featured a brilliant piano transcription of a popular song of the day. But what was I to do? I'd only just begun piano lessons so I obviously couldn't tackle anything as demand as this. My dad came up with the answer and told me about the computer which they had at work which played from standard musical notation. I promptly bought one and set to work entering the music. Piano transcriptions do take a long time to enter into the computer, but they are well worth the effort. The results are surprisingly good, though a big like hearing foot-pumped piano rolls.

Another great Christmas present followed with a copy of the EMI book 'Jazz Master' but still not satisfied, I then took to that other strange hobby i.e. rummaging in old second-hand bookshops for old copies of sheet music. I must say I have been very successful on numerous occasions.

I then decided to write to this Billy Mayerl Circle which I had read about and promptly posted a letter off. Nothing. A few years later (literally!) I received a letter from EMI archives telling me that the Billy Mayerl Circle had disbanded in 1978 when the founder Nick Nichols had died. Before I had a chance to recontact them I had changed jobs and moved to London. When I finally settled in and had bought the Eric Parkin CDs I was then reinspired to contact EMI again. I gave them a ring and they put me in touch with what was to become the London Billy Mayerl Society.

Thanks to everyone in it my collection has multiplied at least twenty-fold and I have recordings and sheet music which I thought I would never get and also many of which I wasn't aware.

Special thanks to the two Mikes (Harth and Lorenzini) for introducing me to Klavar and making the playing of Mayerl's music a bit more of reality.

This photo of members was taken at a recent meeting in May. 1994

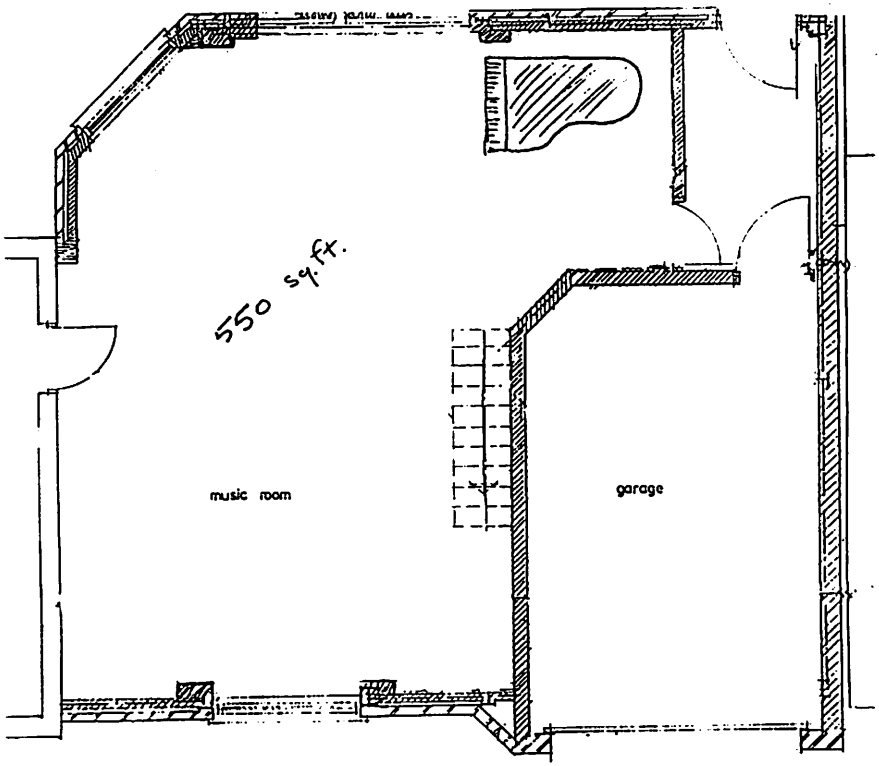
Room for Music

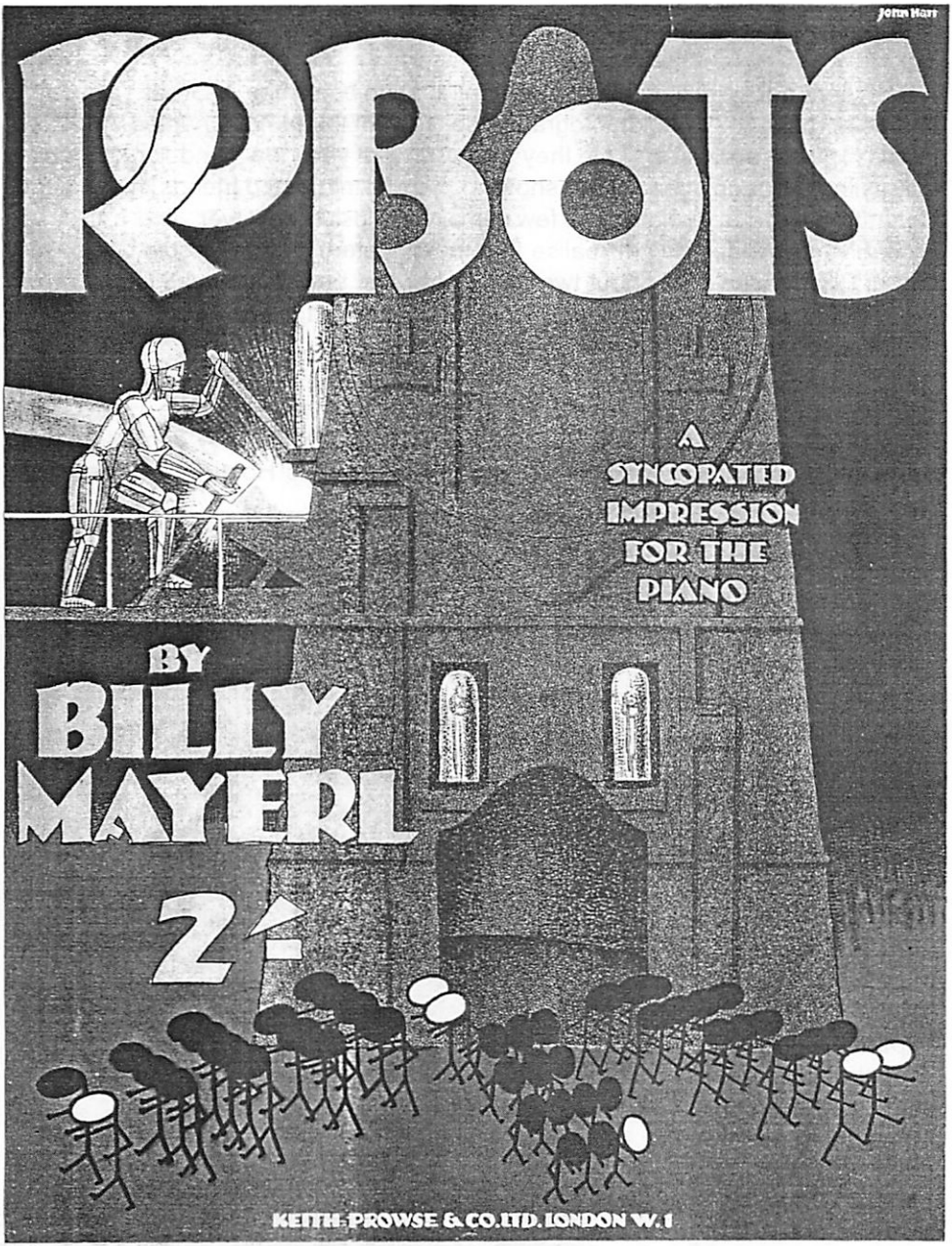
Anybody who has had an extension to their home built will tell you what a trauma it all was and so it is for the music room under construction at Shellwood. The foundations, steelwork and brickwork have gone up reasonably quickly, but now our builder has been distracted by another job somewhere and things have ground to a halt, hopefully not for too long.

As you can see from the plan and photo we hope to be able to seat at least forty people at our concerts and have had promises to perform from many well known pianists.

When the room is finally finished, the two 'Young Chang' uprights will be moved in and then the search is on for a decent 'grand'. I look forward to this, as I am sure it will be a fascinating pursuit, taking me to many strange and wonderful auctions, salerooms etc.

My collection of Billy Mayerl music covers is gradually growing and destined to be framed and hung on the music room walls, creating the right atmosphere for Society Meetings for many years to come.





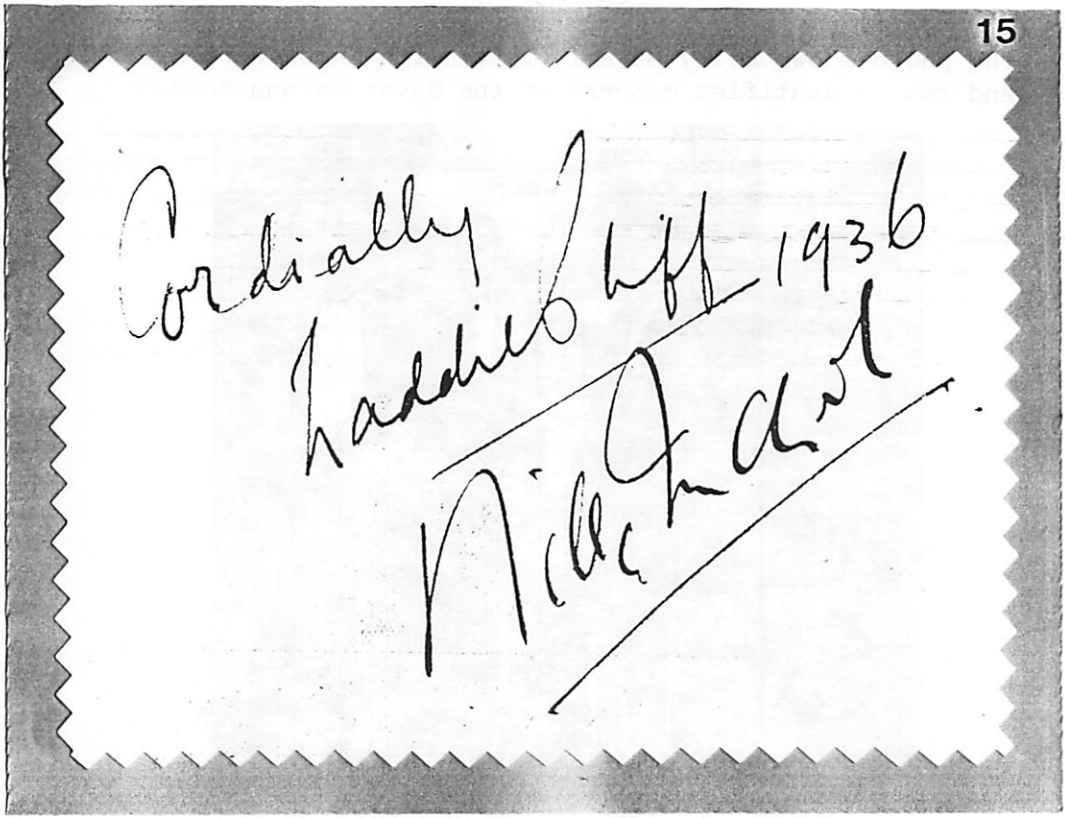
Here is a rare cover of Billy's marvellous 'Robots'. We think this plus 'Honky Tonk' and 'Chopsticks' are the hardest to find.

A Page from the Past

A few years ago, while browsing in an antiquarian bookshop in Great Yarmouth, I came across a pair of old autograph books full of the famous names of variety in the 1930's and 40's. As they were priced very low, and looked quite interesting, I bought them. After showing them to interested friends, most of the signatures were deciphered. A few remained elusive however, and as you've probably guessed, I did not realise that the signature next to Laddie Cliff's was that of Billy Mayerl's for about two years after first buying it! I was familiar with the signatures used on sheet music and club magazines, but these had obviously been stylised to make them legible.

Billy and Laddie did their variety act at several theatres along the East Coast during 1936. These were on Sunday evenings and when they came to Great Yarmouth, they either visited or stayed at The Queen's Hotel (now called The New Beach).

Both were very busy during this year. Billy was preparing for his new show "Over She Goes" and Laddie, as well as being one of the stars, was also the producer. Besides this, Laddie could be seen in his recent film "Happy", a musical which co-starred Stanley Lupino. Sadly he died about two years later.
The photo shows Billy Mayerl and Laddie Cliff playing snooker, about 1935.



Off The Record - A regular column by John Watson

The aim of this series is to look in some detail at interesting recordings of Billy Mayerl and his music, usually on 78's.

COLUMBIA 4589

I'm sure that most fans of Billy Mayerl would agree that Marigold is probably his best known recording. But interestingly, that same recording session also produced one of his least known records, Columbia 4589.

The details of the record are as follows:

4589

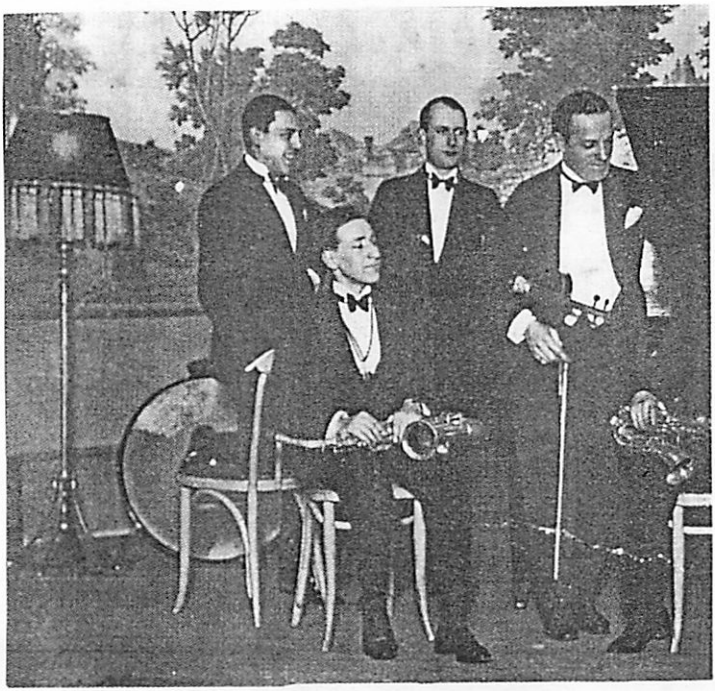
Ramon Newton (Baritone) with Billy Mayerl (piano solo accomp uncredited) with unidentifed violin obbligato — rec. October 7, 1927

WA 6281 Souvenirs (Edgar Leslie & Horatio Nicholls)

Ramon Newton (bariton) with Billy Mayerl (piano accomp. uncredited) — rec. September 29, 1927

WA 6282-2 Old Names of Old Flames (Howard Johnston & Irving Bibo)

The photo shows Billy Mayerl (left) with Ramon Newton (violin) and two unidentified members of the Savoy Havana Band.



At the time when this record was recorded, (Sept-Oct 1927), Ramon Newton was working with the Savoy Havana Band. Billy Mayerl's last recording with them had been made almost 18 months previously, so Billy was probably Ramon Newton's choice as a pianist. It also seems quite likely that Ramon Newton could have asked one of the violinists in the Savoy Havana Band if he wanted to earn a few extra bob for a morning's work. The violinists at about that time were Paul Spector, Reg Batten, Jack Miranda and Teddy Sinclair. Although Ramon Newton himself was a violinist, he could hardly sing and play the violin at the same time (or could he?).

Of course, our mystery violinist could have been one of Columbia's recording artists of the time. Teddy Bryan (a pseudonym for Sascha Jacobson) and S. Kneale Kelly are two possibilities, or it could be none of the above mentioned! Research is continuing and any further information would be most welcome.

Souvenirs was first recorded on Thursday, September 29, 1927 along with Old Names of Old Flames. However, the two takes of the former were both rejected and it was remade on Friday, October 7, 1927, together with four piano solos: Marigold, Hollyhock, Punch and Chopsticks. The issued version of Marigold that we are all familiar with is in fact take 2. But at least Billy got his name on the record label this time!

Of the two sides, Souvenirs is the more interesting. It starts off as a rather serious sounding slow ballad, but, as with so many of Billy's recordings, it finishes as an up-tempo number, with Ramon Newton's crooning vocal over Billy's stylish syncopated piano accompaniment. And of course Billy makes the most of the song, putting in some flashy breaks. Compared to this, Old Names of Old Flames comes across as a rather banal sentimental ballad.

But, as can be seen on the printed label, the information given to the poor old record buyer (this was in the days before we all became "consumers") was not very accurate. After spending his heard earned three shillings, and expecting a baritone with an orchestra, what he got in fact was a baritone with piano accompaniment, with some violin here and there! One wonders if it would have been any consolation to have known that the pianist was Billy Mayerl

I'm sure that Billy and the violinist (Ramon Newton) would have been amused at the grandiose description given to their efforts, but why not credit them by name? What was Columbia's logic? It seems that this descriptive error was corrected at a later date, probably when the record was re-pressed, but still with no credit for Billy on the label.

IN THE PIPELINE

The Society is currently associated with three main projects. The first is to produce a book on Billy himself, to remedy the outrageous gap in the literature. One has only to look in the relevant section in a public library to see the wealth of books devoted to one or other aspect of jazz, much of it, one would have thought, of pretty specialist interest. By contrast, there is very little on ragtime, and nothing specifically devoted to the novelty style.

So a number of society members are getting together to fill this gap so far as Billy is concerned. The intention is to have a short biography plus chapters on the music, a catalogue of his compositions, a discography, and an essay on the most important other writers in the novelty idiom.

Second, as many of you will already know, our Chairman is building a music-room which will house a grand piano and where the Society hopes to be able to hold regular soirées at which we will invite artists who specialise or have shown interest in our particular subject. These, of course, will only be open to members and their guests.

A little more long term is the plan to hold what we hope will be only the first of a regular event, A Convention held over a weekend at which we would hope to have concerts, talks on related subjects and of course an opportunity to meet others with the same interests. If we widened our scope slightly to include all the light music of the period 1920 - 1939, I would have thought there would be no problem in getting sufficient numbers to make it a viable proposition, and during the coming year your committee will be getting in touch with other societies with an interest in the period in the hope that they would be interested in making it a joint venture. There is an enormous number of jazz festivals round this country, most of them offering very reasonable inclusive prices for accommodation and food as well as entry to the musical events, and I can't believe that there isn't sufficient interest to hold at least one such devoted to the light music of our period.

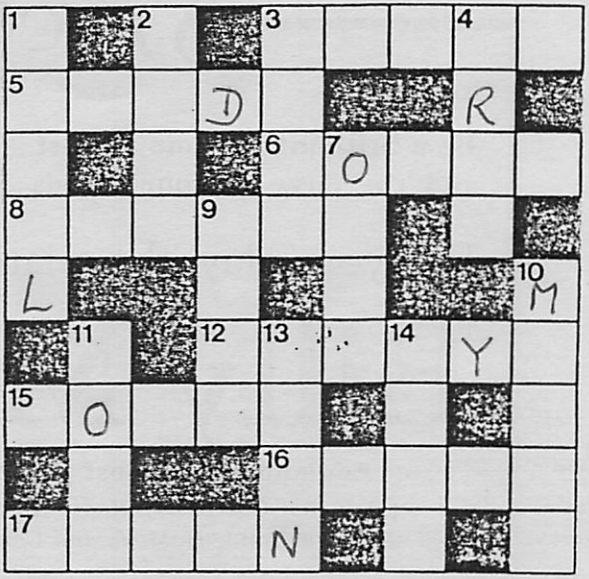
SOCIETY OFFICERS

Chairman	Mike Lorenzini
Hon. Treasurer	John Playle
Hon. Secretary	Kathy Lorenzini
Archivist	John Smith
Committee Members	John Archer, Mike Harth, Phil Legg, Hugh Palmer, John Watson
Magazine Editor	Mike Harth

DATES OF FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Sunday, August 7
Sunday, September 18
Sunday, October 30
Sunday, December 11

3 - 6 pm at SHELLWOOD, St. Leonards Road
Thames Ditton, Surrey KT7 ORN
Tel: 081 224 1521



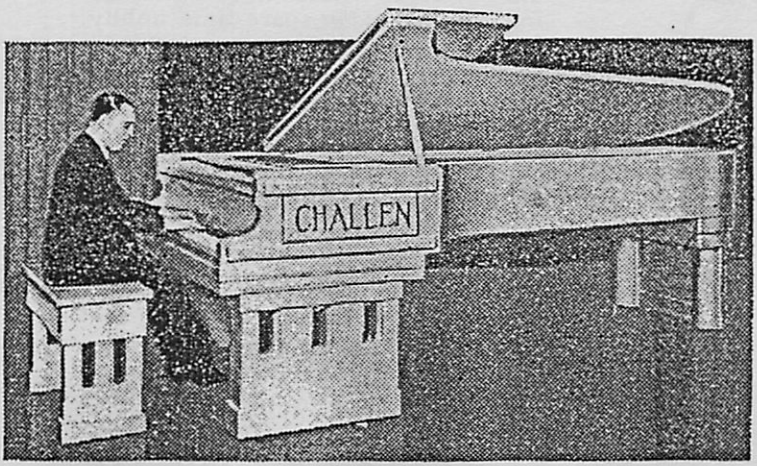
Down

1. If they will rush, they're bound to get mixed up (5)
2. This is only 10 down in the early morning (4)
3. Does this conceal a hereditary waltz? (4)
4. This is my Christmas (4)
7. It's past sketching chat (4)
9. Anything like this needs the porter (4)
10. (see 2 down) but then it gets messed up (5)
11. Dinner on the farm - it must be harvest-time (4)
13. This quaker is sweet (4)
14. Does being higgledy-piggledy make it Irish? (4)

Across

3. Surely that's not their natural shade? (5)
5. Did Billy keep just one of these in his garden? (5)
6. A key was needed for his love, by royal arrangement (5)
8. Was Jack's better? (6)
12. This piano is all over the place (6)
15. Doing the samba or just a waltz? (5)
16. Her cap was in the corner (5)
17. Does he get a turn to himself? (5)

Every clue in this crossword refers to one of Billy's compositions - mostly the original works, but a few transcriptions thrown in for good measure.



Billy Mayerl—and a piano. The world's largest piano.

Taken from 'Music for All'
(inc. Radio Music)
Volume 8 Number 47 (c. 1926)