

JAN. 2007

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The BMS now has its own website. www.billymayerlsociety.co.uk courtesy of BMS member Roy Wainwright, who has organised the whole thing in fine style.

All BMS members on the net please tell as many people as possible to set up links. This year's concerts will include Peter Jacobs who will be including some *Lothar Perl* in his program, Alex Hassan who will surprise and delight us as usual, Guy Rowland with a tribute to *Jack Wilson* as his theme and Martin Litton who, now his broken thumb has healed, will be including *The Four Aces* in his concert.

I have recently improved the video recording facilities at Shellwood so as to be able to offer DVDs in the 16:9 format with various technical improvements throughout. Our thanks go out to Mike Harth for providing articles and a challenging crossword Also to John Watson for his entertaining and informative articles.

Last year BMS member John Smith (from Walthamstow) generously marked the occasion of the BMS being in existence for 15 years by having a Birthday cake made and iced, this was duly sliced up and enjoyed by everyone present. Photographs were taken of this occasion but due to a catastrophic hard drive failure on my computer they, and many other stored items, were lost for good.

It remains only for the BMS to wish its members a very happy new year.

Sunday Concerts & Meetings at *Shellwood* St Leonards Rd. Thames Ditton 3 - 6pm

Feb 4th	AGM followed by a members' meeting
May 20th	<i>Concert</i> Peter Jacobs <i>piano</i>
July 8th	<i>Concert</i> Guy Roland <i>piano</i>
Aug 5th	<i>Concert</i> Alex Hassan <i>piano</i>
Sept 30th	<i>Concert</i> Martin Litton <i>piano</i>
Nov 4th	BMS members' meeting
Dec 16th	Members' Xmas concert (£5 per person)



Please try to reserve your programme at least one week before your chosen date. Members can bring 2 new guests to any concert/meeting subject to availability. **Concert** reservations are £12 per person and include refreshments. Please phone **020 8224 1521** Reservations are not available at the door.

Autumn Crocus 1

Autumn Crocus 2

3

Are you all avid followers of current events? If so, I wonder if anyone noticed Billy Mayerl's music played briefly during a report last autumn on the Ten O'Clock News (BBC1, 29th September 2006). The item concerned a 25-metre high "sculpture" entitled *The Waste Man* by Antony Gormley, who is better known for another towering work, *The Angel of the North*. The location this time was Margate, and to set the scene viewers were treated to a few bars of *Autumn Crocus*. However it was not played on a piano as one might expect but on a theatre organ, now seemingly the instrument of choice to accompany film of the seaside. I suspect the recording used was that made by Simon Gledhill in 1995.

Created from rubbish collected by volunteers, *The Waste Man* took over two months to build but had a very short life. It was burnt the day after it featured on our screens. Apparently it was not intended to be a work of art. For those interested, it was constructed so the fiery spectacle could be filmed for use in a motion picture.

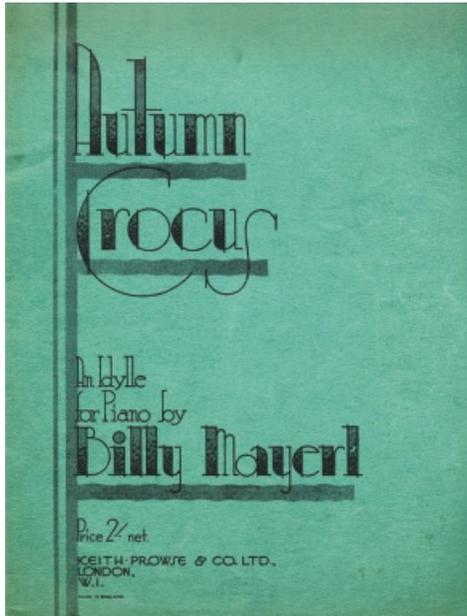
The choice of Mayerl's music to accompany this report was perhaps more inspired than was realised. For the composer himself had personal links with Margate having appeared there at the Winter Garden Theatre on 25th May 1947. Moreover, his programme included two pieces most apt for the news story, particularly its climax. For on that occasion he played De Falla's *Ritual Fire Dance* and his transcription of *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*!

Are you aware that Billy Mayerl recently received yet another belated endorsement from the musical Establishment? His *Autumn Crocus* was one of the Grade 8 examination pieces set by the ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) for their 2005-06 syllabus. This

inspired choice means that Billy's name will have come to the attention of many young students learning the piano who perhaps otherwise would not discover his fine music. Hopefully it will inspire some of them to investigate and enjoy more of his other works.

That *Autumn*

Crocus is now an exam piece has had another consequence, one perhaps more surprising, yet beneficial. For currently there are four renditions of the aforesaid autumnal Idylle posted on YouTube.com, the fashionable website everyone is allegedly surfing and talking about. As each is by a young learner one cannot expect a professional standard, but at least viewers will get a flavour of the composer. Those unfamiliar with the YouTube.com phenomenon will find a staggering diversity of material. The site includes many musicians at all levels and styles so I expect more performances of Billy Mayerl's music will emerge with time.



Niel Du Preez concert 2006

I doubt if there are many Music Societies that alternate so easily and with such justification between the classical and the popular outlook. Our last recital featured Keith Nichols, coming very definitely from one side of the track, and this time we have Niel du Preez, as firmly based on the other side. But variety is the spice of life, to coin a phrase, and it is a good thing not to be too hidebound.

Once again there were some biographical details of Niel in the BM Society Magazine No. 23, so I shan't repeat them here. This was one of the most classically based recitals we have put on, but none the less enjoyable for that. Niel began with a *Chaconne* by Handel, one of the pieces from, if I remember correctly, his seventh Piano Suite. As most of you will know, and the rest of you no doubt soon realised, this is basically a continuous set of variations on a simple eight-bar theme, and for my money much more enjoyable than the better-known *Harmonious Blacksmith* set. The performance was nicely controlled, with a particularly fluent left hand.

He followed this with 3 *Intermezzi* by Brahms. Regular readers of this magazine will possibly recall that Brahms is far from being a favourite composer of your reviewer, and I consider this particular set largely Schumann-and-water, so I am not the best person to judge the quality of Niel's playing here. But it was clear he is a sensitive player, and I even quite enjoyed the third of the set, more lively than the others.

The *Song Of The Fir-Tree* restored my good spirits. It was immediately obvious, if we hadn't known beforehand, that Niel was approaching the piece from the classical side of the spectrum, but one of the features that is so fascinating about Billy is that he can accommodate different approaches. There was no lack of rhythm in the syncopated section, though it was perhaps just a little tighter than a player versed in the ragtime tradition would have made it. But it certainly

worked, and made an interesting contrast. The *In My Garden* suites are a sort of halfway stage between the two traditions, making them particularly suitable for this recital, and it was a real treat to hear the whole twelve numbers right through. We started off in the spring, and though these pieces were clearly no sort of technical challenge to a pianist of Niel's attainments, we could tell right from the beginning that he had devoted as much attention and care to them as he would to a sonata by one of the classical masters.

To comment on each piece individually would be tedious, so I will just remark that *Carpet of Yellow* was played a good deal more slowly than I would have, and this made it actually more difficult to play rather than less, since one has to sustain the line and also it is harder to keep perfect time when playing slowly. Niel justified his approach with some beautiful playing, after which *April Showers*, delicately handled, made an intriguing contrast with its relatively fast passage-work.

Summertime is perhaps my favourite of the four suites, and Niel gave *Meadowsweet*, the first of the set, just the right amount of lilt. *Alpine Bluebell*, again, was not as helter-skelter as some of us would take it, but finely controlled and with no lack of impetus. *Amber Leaves*, from *Autumn*, is in my view the most beautiful of all these twelve pieces, and Niel gave it a truly exquisite performance, clearly relishing its subtle harmonies. Then *Hollyberry*, the last of this set, prepared us for Christmas, and though this is probably the easiest of the four suites from the technical point of view, there was no let-up in the care and attention Niel lavished on this last set. Altogether it made a very enjoyable group, demonstrating particularly clearly how thoroughly Billy had absorbed his training at Trinity.

Then we had one more piece of Billy's *Look Lively*, which sounds rather like a transcription of one of the orchestral

Edwardian Musical Comedy

novelties of the period. It benefited from the careful handling it was given, emerging as perhaps rather more substantial than one might have thought. Lastly we were given a set of *Preludes* from Debussy's first book. They all have descriptive titles, and Debussy said that he added the titles after the pieces were written, though it is hard to believe that he didn't have some concrete idea in his mind while he was writing them. In the first, *Le vent dans la plaine*, one could almost see the wind moaning across deserted spaces, after which the *Girl With The Flaxen Hair* provided a more domestic touch. The interruptions to the *Serenade* in the next piece were more vigorous than I was expecting, providing a good contrast to the previous number, while in his sound-picture of the *Submerged Cathedral* Niel extracted some impressive sonorities from the Seiler grand, and I was reminded what an excellent bass it now possesses.

I thought at first that *Le Danse de Puck* started off too slowly, but I was soon convinced that Niel had in fact chosen exactly the right tempo for his reading, with a suitably capricious *Puck*. Finally, *Minstrels* brought the group to a lively and even at moments tuneful close. Throughout Niel's grasp was never less than total: he displayed considerable ability at conjuring up sound-pictures, and I hope that those of you to whom these pieces were new enjoyed them as much as I did.

The recital finished with the well-known *Gnossienne* in F minor by Erik Satie, a piece which has almost entered the realms of pop, since it appears on more than one album of Classical Chillout discs. I would hazard a guess that it is a favourite of Niel's, since he played it almost as if it belonged to him, taking slight liberties which in context felt perfectly justified.

The contract between this recital and the previous one by Keith Nichols could hardly be more extreme, but I found them both thoroughly enjoyable in their own right, and relish the opportunity to sample different approaches to the master.

It seems to me that Musical Comedy can be divided into three main periods, starting with what we might call the romantic period, as exemplified by the works of Lionel Monckton in England and Victor Herbert in America, and this would encompass those from, say, the 1890s to the era of ragtime. The arrival of this new style marked a change in the books as well as the music: an element of sassiness entered, a more down-to-earth element, as is immediately obvious if one thinks of the products of say, Irving Berlin or Richard Rodgers. Of course works in the old style were still being written, such as Rudolf Friml's *Rose Marie* and *The Student Prince* in America, *The Dancing Years* and *Glamorous Night* of Ivor Novello in England, but they were to some extent survivals and certainly less characteristic of the period.

Ragtime is a piano-based idiom, and the music of the ragtime era is essentially based on the piano in its harmonic structure and

NEW DRESSES FOR "CHU CHIN CHOW"
Very Suitable to the Sultry Climate of Old England.



The melodies that went along with this. But the music of the next era, spearheaded by the Beatles, was based on the guitar, which has a different harmonic structure, and the melodies as well as the harmonies reflected this. On top of this there developed a tendency to rely much more on spectacle, so that whereas in the old days one went to a show primarily for the music, the production became more important, and one got the sort of shows where, as a wag put it, you came out humming the scenery. There was a tendency, too, for the songs to be more integrated into what was happening on stage, which perhaps added to dramatic verisimilitude but also meant that they had rather less independent existence outside the show. Whereas, between the two World Wars the world of popular music was largely dominated by songs from shows and to a lesser extent from films, nowadays it is quite rare for them to make much of a showing.

The peak period for Musical Comedy in Britain was around the turn of the century, with its apex in the Edwardian era (1901-1910). The great names of that time are little more than names to us now, while the shows themselves are in an all but forgotten style. During the first world War *Chu Chin Chow* was the big success, but as we entered the twenties and the influence of ragtime spread, so did the new style of music influenced by it, a style in which the Americans asserted that dominance which, aided by superior production values, they have retained ever since.

The Edwardian era was also the period of stage-door Johnnies waiting with bunches of flowers, when even the chorus girls could cherish dreams of marrying into society, and a number of them did, especially, of course, the stars. In 1901 Lionel Monckton, the finest composer of the period, married the new sweetheart of the London Stage,

Gertie Millar, and she had her first starring role that year in his *The Toreador*, after which she went on to star in many other of his shows. But after his death at the early age of 62 she remarried a Year or so later, becoming Lady Dudley, and a noted society hostess, and she was far from the only one to make this transition. Since then, though, the male roles have gradually assumed greater importance, while in our more sophisticated era, it's just as likely to be the chorus-boys that get taken to dinner!

Perhaps because we are a much older civilisation, we don't seem to value our past heritage as highly as they do theirs, and whereas in the States there is a huge library of American musical comedy recordings, dating back to the early days, in England there is only a small handful. So it has been left to a company based in Estonia, of all places, to revive for us memories of those great days. They have released a CD with selections from three Monckton shows: *The Cingalee*, *The Quaker Girl* and *The Arcadians*.

The Bel-Etage company that performs these selections took over an old Music-Hall at the heart of Tallinn in 2000 and has since produced and recorded many Victorian and Edwardian shows, musical revues and comic operas. The company is well known, it seems, for championing British music, especially Gilbert and Sullivan, up till then little known there. I very much regret that they are too far away for me to visit their theatre, otherwise I would regularly attend, but at least I can listen to them on disc.

By largely restricting themselves to one verse and chorus, sometimes using only the chorus, they have managed to cram 39 numbers onto this recording, and it has given me an enormous amount of pleasure: in fact I can't offhand, think of another disc

with so many good tunes. I won't bother to list any of their titles, since *The Quaker Girl*, the latest of them, was first produced in 1910, and so there will be few indeed to whom they might be familiar, though I recall seeing a touring production of this last between forty and fifty years ago. But to anyone who likes the style of the period, I recommend this disc highly. The members of the company, I believe, are all Estonian, but their command of English is very good, in some cases excellent. I so enjoyed this music that I searched for anything else in the same style. It was disappointing to find that this was the only recording by this company, at least the only one available here, But I did find a bigger selection from *The Arcadians* on a Classics For Pleasure disc. This show opened in 1909, and by the time it closed in 1911 it had run for 809 performances as well as being produced all over the British Empire, as it was then, and also in New York in 1910, Vienna in 1911, and Oaris in 1913. The disc also has six numbers sung by Gwen Catley, a name I am sure some of you will remember, from various operettas, and these include *Moonstruck* from another Monckton show, *Our Miss Gibbs*, a favourite number I remember from my long distant youth.

Incidentally, the booklet with this disc has a photo of Monckton on the back. He stares out as if ready to repel all boarders, with a distinctly fierce military-style moustache. Apparently he was a somewhat austere individual, which seems odd in view of the character of his music.

To any who have nostalgic memories of those long departed days or who fancy being reminded of a more elegant, less frantic age, I recommend these discs. The Bel-Etage recording, entitled *The Monckton Album*, has now been taken over by Naxos, and the other Monckton disc is entitled *The Arcadians and Songs from Edwardian Musicals* on CFP. There is also a recording

Of another show of the period, *The Geisha* by Sidney Jones which, though less crammed with top-quality tunes than the Monckton shows, not only notched up 760 performances in London, but was also highly successful on the continent. Vocal scores were published in Italian and German as well as English, while in Germany it was more successful than any current work of the native composers, and in Russia it played a key role in one of Chekov's short stories. The recording is in the Helios series issued by Hyperion, and as a bonus the lyrics of all the numbers are printed in the booklet, as is also the case with the Bel-Etage CD.



8 Cy Walter Piano Solos (Shellwood SWCD32)

As Peter Mintun says in his (copious) notes accompanying this CD, this re-issue of some of the best of Cy Walter's recordings is indeed overdue, since some of them have remained unavailable for over fifty years. He died at the early age of fifty-three, but for years before that sad event he was considered the Dean of Cocktail Pianists, though Walter preferred to describe himself as a specialist in show tunes, and that is what we get on this disc.

I first came across Cy's playing quite a few years ago when Alex Hassan sent over a cassette recording he had made from some of the 78s in his collection. A number of Cy's arrangements were published in the forties and fifties, and after hearing this tape I got hold of a few, only to be dismayed by their extreme difficulty, and so it was good news to hear that some of them were to be included in a recital I planned to attend. No names, no pack drill, but to my dismay they were mangled, and apart from a couple played by Alex in one of his visits to Shellwood I have had to wait until now to hear them as they should be heard, and in a recording that is as good as modern techniques can make it.

The disc begins with Cy's version of *Begin The Beguine*, from a not particularly successful show, *Jubilee*. The melody is unusual, since instead of the usual 32-bar length, it goes on and on for over a hundred bars without repeats, and Cy gives it the works, adding an extra rhythm of his own besides the beguine already inherent. Another tour de force comes next with his version of Johnny Green's *Body And Soul*. Starting off at ballad pace, the second chorus starts as an up-tempo version, returning to the original tempo for its conclusion. Then we get a medley from the film *Broadway Melody of 1940*. Apparently Cy much preferred to use show-tunes, but he

would make an exception when the score was by one of his favourite composers, and this was by Cole Porter, who was also greatly admired by L B Mayer, the despot of MGM. Mayer treated Porter much better than almost all his other employees, though no doubt the fact that Cole had money of his own and so didn't need to work for him was also a factor. (It is said that when someone commented what a large crowd had turned out for Mayer's funeral, the response was 'They wanted to be sure the b-----d was really dead.')

The medley begins with a lively version of *I've Got My Eyes On You*, followed by a more relaxed version of *Between You And Me*, after which the first number returns. In the second part (obviously the second side of a 78) we are treated to *I Happen To Be In Love* and an intense arrangement of *I Concentrate On You*. This is followed by another medley, from *By Jupiter*, the last show Rodgers wrote with Hart before the latter's untimely death. It was never performed in England, and has remained one of their lesser-known works, so it was particularly interesting to hear numbers from it. *Everything I've Got* makes a hectic beginning, with *Nobody's Heart* relaxing the pace before *Everything I've Got* returns. The second part begins with *Careless Rhapsody*, not really vintage Rodgers, but Cy makes it interesting, and the same could be said of the next number, *Jupiter Forbid*.

Crazy Rhythm is perhaps the best-remembered number of a largely forgotten songwriter, Joseph Meyer (composer of the ill-fated *Whitebirds* revue, the biggest financial show-biz disaster of the time, and in which Billy starred with his then partner Gwen Farrar) and after it come two more relaxed arrangements, *Dancing In The Dark* and *Embraceable You*, followed by a particularly inventive version of *Falling In*

Love With Love from *The Boys From Syracuse*. recall seeing a revival of this last show at the Drury Lane Theatre a good few years ago. The book, though based on Shakespeare, was pretty appalling, but the songs (which included *Sing For Your Supper* and *You Have Cast Your Shadow*) were so strong they carried the show.

Higher And Higher is another less well-known show, but it included one of Rodger's most beautiful songs, *It Never Entered My Mind*, which forms the centre-piece of the second part of this medley.

I Can't Get Started starts off in a fashion Mintun, in his notes, describes as languid, and we are treated to some beautiful slow playing before a hectic conclusion.

Unusually, the next medley contains songs from two different shows, though by the one composer. *Just One Of Those Things* provides a lively opening, after which *I Get A Kick Out Of You* is more relaxed, though finishing in up-tempo style.

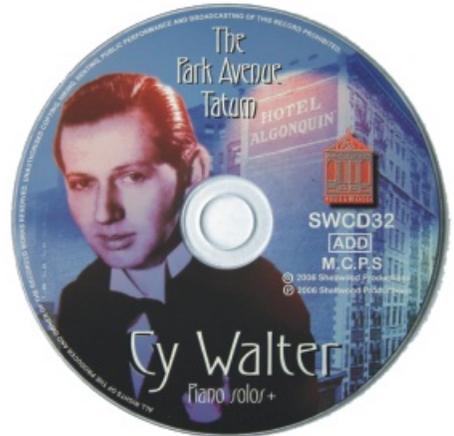
Lady In The Dark by Kurt Weill is next. I have long loved the music of this show, possessing a recording of several numbers by Gertrude Lawrence, and remember going to see the film of it (a revival at the National Film Theatre) with high expectations, only to be bitterly disappointed, since *Jenny* was the only song retained from the score.

My Ship is played comparatively straight, with a busily flowing left hand, after which *This Is New* in fairly similar style leads into the most famous number, *Jenny*.

Liza, another Gershwin number, is treated more elaborately, with a hectic finish, and it is followed by a medley from the still well-remembered Rodgers & Hart *Pal Joey*, which I had the pleasure of seeing when it was revived in London not so many years ago, with Sian Phillips in the lead. Starting with an unsentimental version of *Bewitched*, *I Could Write A Book* forms a more relaxed interlude before an up-tempo version of *Plant You Now Dig You Later* finishes off.

Then it's back to Cole Porter with a *Panama Hattie* medley, a less well-known score. Cy starts with *My Mother Would Love You*, followed by *Make It Another Old-Fashioned, Please*. The second part starts with *Let's Be Buddies* I have a recording of this with Ethel Merman and, I suspect, the alarmingly precocious Shirley Temple *Who Would Have Dreamed* and a presto *Fresh As A Daisy*

Cy's style is of course very different to Billy's, but they do have a very important feature in common: instead of the tasteless tinkering indulged in by so many, they never lose the original melody (which you may remember was a prominent part of Billy's advice to budding pianists) and yet produce arrangements that can be listened to over and over again with pleasure.



It's Only A Paper Moon is a Harold Arlen number, and again Cy displays his apparently inexhaustible inventiveness in this comparatively extended treatment. *'S Wonderful*, which follows, starts off quietly, in almost subdued mood, but quickly goes up-tempo, while in *The Blue Room* the melody is varied more than usual, but never lost.

The Way You Look Tonight is another number from a film, this time by Jerome Kern, and makes a good contrast to the preceding number, being played much nearer to the original, and with less harmonic variety than usual, with a beautifully flowing left hand.

Very Warm For May was not one of Jerome Kern's successes (it only ran for 59 performances) but it did contain *All The Things You Are*, which opens this medley from the show, and is given an appropriately tender rendering. It leads into *Heaven In My Arms*, and then the second part starts with *All In Fun. In The Heart Of The Dark* follows, and it concludes with *That Lucky Fellow*. All these last three numbers were new to me, and if not vintage Kern, Cy certainly makes them worth listening to.

The last solo is also by Kern, his *Waltz in Swing Time* from the film *Swing Time*, and here Cy lets himself go

Finally we hear him on two pianos with Gil Bowers and an orchestra in a medley from Porter's show, *You Never Know*. This starts with *From Alpha to Omega*, followed by *At Long Last Love* and *For No Rhyme Or Reason. You Never Know* starts the second part, and then we hear *What Shall I Do* and *Maria*. The only one of these numbers I knew was the first, but they are all recognizably Porter, and I for one am always glad to come across a number I don't know by this particularly favourite composer.

I was sorry when this disc came to an end. Quite apart from the interest of the arrangements and the pianism, it is delightful to hear such a wonderful collection of numbers, some of which are at least relatively unfamiliar, and we are also given, at nearly 79 minutes, an extremely generous helping. If you are a piano or show-tune fan, don't miss this disc, and if you are both you're getting extra value!

This CD is of course available to BMS members for £10 if purchased at a meeting or a concert.

Please visit www.shellwood.co.uk for a complete list of available CDS.

The Billy Mayerl Group

Members will no doubt be pleased to learn, if they do not already know, of the existence of another organisation dedicated to Billy Mayerl. An online forum hosted by Yahoo, it is called The Billy Mayerl Group. Founded by ex-BMS member Michael Edwards of Victoria, Australia on 26th January 2005, it is a timely initiative given the now widespread usage of the internet. Moreover, it is free and anyone can join. As it approaches its second birthday it currently has 18 members.

Michael Edwards has written the following: "In creating this group, I'm hoping to attract the attention of those with an interest in the music of British composer Billy Mayerl (1902-1959), composer of once well-known light and novelty piano pieces such as "Marigold" and "The Four Aces" Suite, and also other composers of similar light music, usually for piano, in that style which straddles the border between jazz, ragtime, light classical, and even sometimes shows the clear influence of the experimental harmonies of impressionists of the time such as Debussy and Ravel. I would like to welcome all with any kind of interest in this music, including performers of it, and those who research this music or who promote the music of these composers. I'd like to encourage a friendly, informal atmosphere, and develop a sense of community amongst those of us who share a common interest in these composers and their music. The music is usually carefree and fun, and I want this group to be fun as well as informative."

To join, visit the group's home page at <http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/BillyMayerl/> where there is a link for joining. Why not take a look and give it your support?

Keith Nichols concert review 2006

I imagine there are very few of you who haven't heard of Keith Nichols readers of this magazine will have learnt something about him in our last issue, and it would be superfluous for me to repeat any of that here, so I will content myself with a reminder that he is considered to be a foremost authority on Classic Jazz and ragtime. This was his first visit to Shellwood, and he got us into the appropriate mood at the start by saying 'It's Sunday afternoon: let's relax,' taking us straightway into *I Don't Want To Walk Without You Baby*, a number with which I confess to being unfamiliar. This led into the much more familiar *If I Could Be With You One Hour Tonight*, which we all know from the James P Johnson-Fats Waller duet, but Keith gave us a new slant, singing the verse and one chorus, and finishing with a helter-skelter presto.

Then, in his relaxed and informal style, he introduced *Memories Of You*, which led into *The Chevy Chase*, by Eubie Blake, new to me but well worth hearing. He told us the story about Eubie when he was a hundred years old, but my favourite is the one of when, just a couple of years earlier, he was asked at what age sexual desire died down, he replied 'I don't know: you'll have to ask someone older.' More traditional ragtime followed with *Heliotrope Bouquet*, one of several for which Joplin had a collaborator, and then it was time for another song.

We were given *My Little Bimbo Down On A Bamboo Isle*, a number from the 1920s embodying the innocent naughtiness of the period. Keith has a pleasant voice and, more importantly, he knows how to put over these numbers, and when he remarked at the end 'They don't write 'em like that nowadays' I suspect we all agreed, and with a certain

Rueful feeling. Then we moved into the 1930s with *Crying For The Carolines*, which Keith well described as a haunting melody.

I well remember owning a red-label 78 rpm record of the next number, the song 'My Canary Has Circles Under His Eyes,' and it was delightful to be reminded of it. Harold Arlen came next, a song-writer who never became as famous as he deserved, largely, I suspect, because he never had a big Broadway hit. After his *I've Got The World On A String* came an up-tempo version of *We're In The Money* by Harry Warren, again less well-known than Rodgers, Gershwin and Porter and so on, in his case because he wrote almost exclusively for films. A more lyrical number of his followed, *I Only Have Eyes For You*.

Moving on to 1935, *Everybody Truckin'*, as lively as its name suggests, was followed by a more relaxed number, *Miss Brown To You*. From 1939 we were treated to one of Hoagy Carmichael's best, *Two Sleepy People*, but then we reverted to 1930 for a short but very lively version of *I Got Rhythm*.

Bix Beiderbecke's *In A Mist* has always seemed to me rather a mess, but it has retained its popularity, so perhaps I am missing something, especially as Keith certainly seemed to be enjoying it. Beiderbecke, of course, was a cornettist, but next we heard an improvisation in the style of a born pianist, Jelly Roll Morton, followed by his *Tomcat Blues*, which started off quietly enough but ended in a stunning display of virtuosity.

Then we were treated to a medley of some of the best numbers of another outstanding pianist, Fats Waller, including *My Very Good Friend The Milkman*, *Baby Where Can You Be*, and *Alligator Crawl*. It finished with *Piccadilly* from the **London Suite**, his attempt at a more extended style of composition, actually

written while he was staying in London. Keith played this as to the manner born, and it made a rousing finish to the first half.

During the interval, while Keith took a well-earned break, we refreshed the inner man (and woman) but before long we were all back in our seats for the second half, which started with a charming number new to me, *It's Going To Be You*, followed by a forties number, *All I Need Is You*, in similar mood. Please write in and tell me if I'm wrong I don't have my references to hand but I believe Billy made a recording of the next piece, *By The Fireside*, playing it of course in his own inimitable style. Keith's version was of course different but very enjoyable.

Keith has done us the honour of composing a piece especially for this recital, and he calls it *Mayerling*, as it is in Billy's style. Those with sharp ears were no doubt busy spotting those parts which were particularly reminiscent of BM, but all of us thoroughly enjoyed it.

Another medley, this time of numbers by one of my favourite songwriters, Cole Porter. We heard *So Easy To Love*, after which Keith sang a chorus of *You're The Top*, followed by one on piano, and then another chorus. But that wasn't all: to conclude he sang and played *Rosalie*.

After that welcome reminder of a great songwriter, we moved to one who was better known as a pianist, James P Johnson, the possessor of a truly astounding technique, the inventor of stride piano, and the best equipped musically of his contemporaries in the field. *Mule Walk* gave evidence of his abilities, and we weren't really surprised to hear Keith remark that he needed a rest after playing it.

Ellington's *Solitude*, which followed on, was of course in quite different mood, and then we had something of a novelty, at least to me, an excerpt from his *Creole Rhapsody*.

Still more Ellington followed with *Sophisticated Lady*, and we said goodbye to him with *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing*, sung and played to make a rousing conclusion to the group.

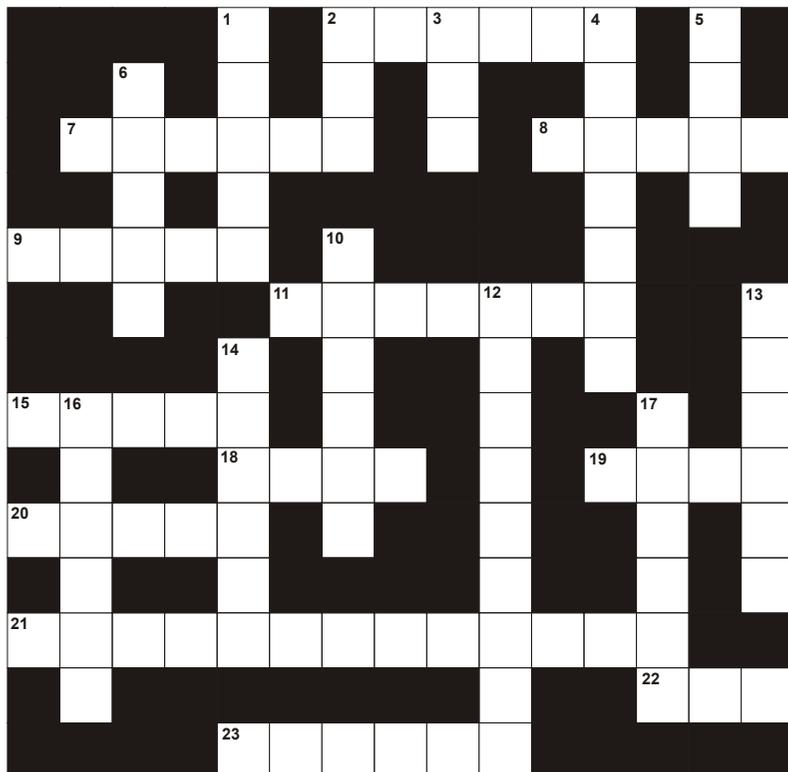
Then Keith displayed yet another side to his talents, a dialect song in Italian-American, *Mariuch On Coney Isle*. I didn't get all the words, perhaps because I am neither Italian or American, but I shall certainly listen to it again till I have worked it all out. After that it seemed natural to follow with some more Fats Waller, *My Fate Is In Your Hands*, *I've Got A Feeling I'm Falling*, *What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, and finally one of Fats' piano pieces, *A Handful Of Keys*, another spot of virtuosity to make an exciting conclusion to a highly entertaining recital.



Billy Mayerl
in best BBC mode circa 1952

Billy's prize crossword

All the clues have some connection with Billy's, life, compositions, transcriptions, adverts and recordings.



ACROSS

2. For the memory
7. Not Billy's piano, surely
8. Simply fascinating
9. Alex loses an ess
11. Merry-go-round
15. Definitely English
18. A quartet
19. Were you there at the birth?
20. Crystalline
21. What you are
22. Twice for pretty baby
23. Serenader

DOWN

1. A strange colour
2. Trumpeter
3. Ring those chimes
4. He should avoid these with his fur-coat
5. Sonar in church
6. Perhaps it's shut-eye time
9. Other people have them
12. Ancient but potent
13. Hairy waltz
14. Two on a tree
16. Fats Waller's girl
17. Not made by an oddity

The first person to send a correctly filled in puzzle to Shellwood will have their free choice of any Shellwood CD or DVD currently available.

Talking Tempo

Billy Mayerl had a reputation for playing fast. Not for nothing was he known as the pianist with lightning fingers. Were it not for his recordings we probably would not know exactly at what speed he actually played his pieces. And so believing he knew best we may have attributed to him a restraint he did not deserve. One wonders if we would be equally surprised if we could somehow hear the great classical composer-pianists of yesteryear. That this is not possible means their reputations remain intact, though surely some of the more egotistical would have found hard to resist the temptation to dazzle by playing at least slightly faster when before an adoring concert audience.

We should not forget that music is an art; that it should communicate. Most pieces have some room for variation of tempo and what is important is that each performance should be judged on its merits. Success here depends not on whether a piece is played fast, slow or normal, but whether a performance is convincing.

As well as for artistic reasons, tempi can and should be influenced by more prosaic factors, such as level of technique, the touch and tone of the instrument and the room acoustic. To adhere rigidly to composers' instructions or metronome markings is to risk being unmusical at best and a disaster at worst. But would some pianists actually notice? There is the danger of not listening properly to the sound produced because one becomes too engrossed with reading the score. The pianists may be concentrating but their attention is focussed too narrowly. Mechanical-sounding playing can result.

As with any component of interpretation, variety of tempo can add new perspectives to our understanding of a piece. Sometimes this can even happen from the same musician, for there are some who seemingly never play a piece the same way twice. Spontaneity brings freshness to well-know pieces, and I welcome it in concerts. On record however I find I return repeatedly to my favourite renditions Of pieces. Over time, these have become my personal definitive versions by which others

are measured. Listening to them is like meeting old friends again. Do others recognise this?

I believe there is more to playing fast than just speeding through a piece. An excellent pianist is able to play fast without the music sounding rushed. Consider Chopin's famous *Fantasia Impromptu*, a work seemingly every pianist has a go at sometime, and one prone to becoming merely a vehicle for showpiece virtuosic display at the expense of the music. I will never forget hearing Mieczyslaw Horszowski play this piece. Whilst played at full tempo, his fine technique created a sense of space, allowing the music to breathe, while waves of expressive phrasing gave it shape. His playing seemed effortless, and was in marked contrast to some others I have heard, who made piano playing sound very hard work indeed and thus detracted from the music. Clearly Horszowski's was a masterful reading. Its insight, clarity of detail and beauty of tone made it a benchmark with which to compare others. This underlines the notion that only through discipline does one achieve great freedom.

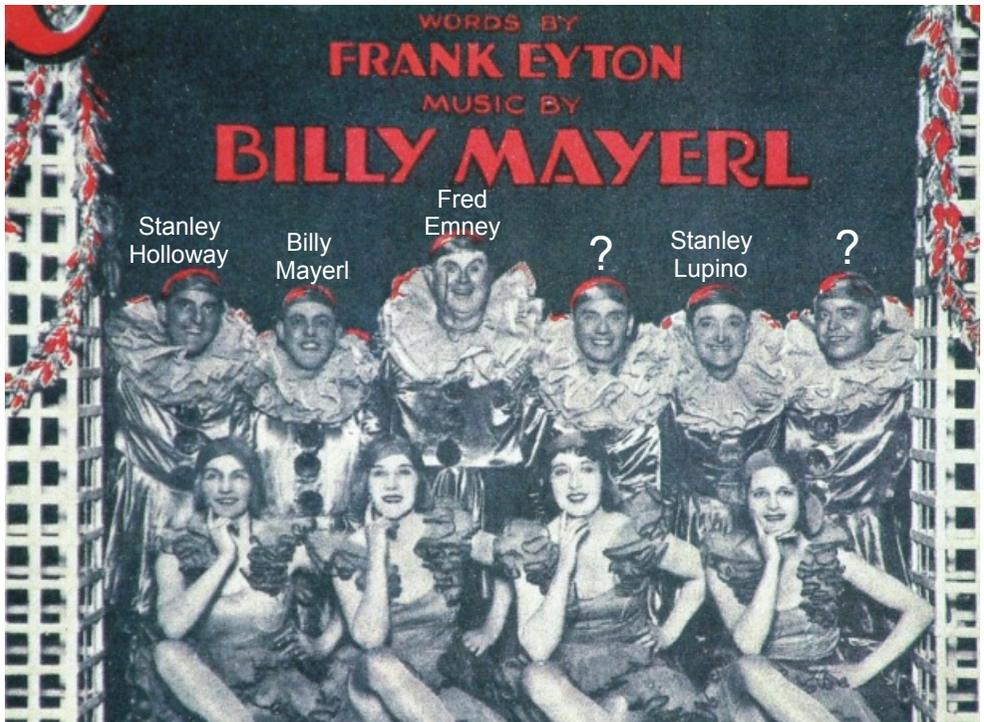
Such observations apply also to other music, including Billy Mayerl's. Early on in his career he spent some years as a dance band pianist. There he learned the importance of maintaining an even tempo throughout a number when playing for dancers. This may or may not have influenced his compositions but it appears it did affect the way he played them. Most members will be familiar with *Sweet William*. I have heard a number of modern pianists slow down in the more technically difficult middle-section, then revert back to the original tempo for the reprise of the opening section. (Some also seem to play the introduction slightly slower.) On his recording Billy was uncompromising, playing it all at the same tempo, thereby indicating his conception of the work. (Other recordings by Billy, particularly the medleys of show songs, have more variation of tempo.) As well As tempo changes, some Modern pianists, especially those from a classical background, like to use rubato. To the purist this is probably even more controversial, though for the more

casual listener personal preference is all that really matters.

This leads us to another concept. Recent years have seen the classical music world embrace authentic performance practice. For example, early-music now has to be played on period instruments (or replicas) to be taken seriously. As well, performers are obliged to play only approved ornamentations and cadenzas. Anyone who has listened to Billy Mayerl's pieces played by the composer and his peers and compared them with most of those by today's pianists will know that authentic performance has not been adopted in this genre. That seems unlikely as many artists would find it too restrictive. But they should at least be aware of the traditions even if they ignore them. If performers and listeners became educated about the music, informed choices and comment could be made. There are different schools of thought on

performance and here I am reminded of a similar debate during the 1970s ragtime revival. That concerned the difference of approach between younger classical musicians and the older jazzmen and ragtimers. In essence it was whether scores should be strictly adhered to (eg Joshua Rifkin playing Joplin), or whether it was okay to improvise a bit (eg Max Morath playing Joplin), as was traditional. While I thought this interesting, I actually quite liked both. One thing I noticed was that the music dramatically changed character. In a sense the same is true of Billy Mayerl's music. For when revisiting his early pieces in later years, Billy attempted to make them sound more modern, probably for commercial reasons. The notes remained the same but not the character. Generally I find these less enjoyable than those gems from the 1920s and 30s as they sure take some beating.

(This article first appeared online on Yahoo's Billy Mayerl Group.)

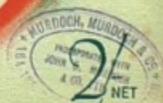


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ON A THEME BY
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