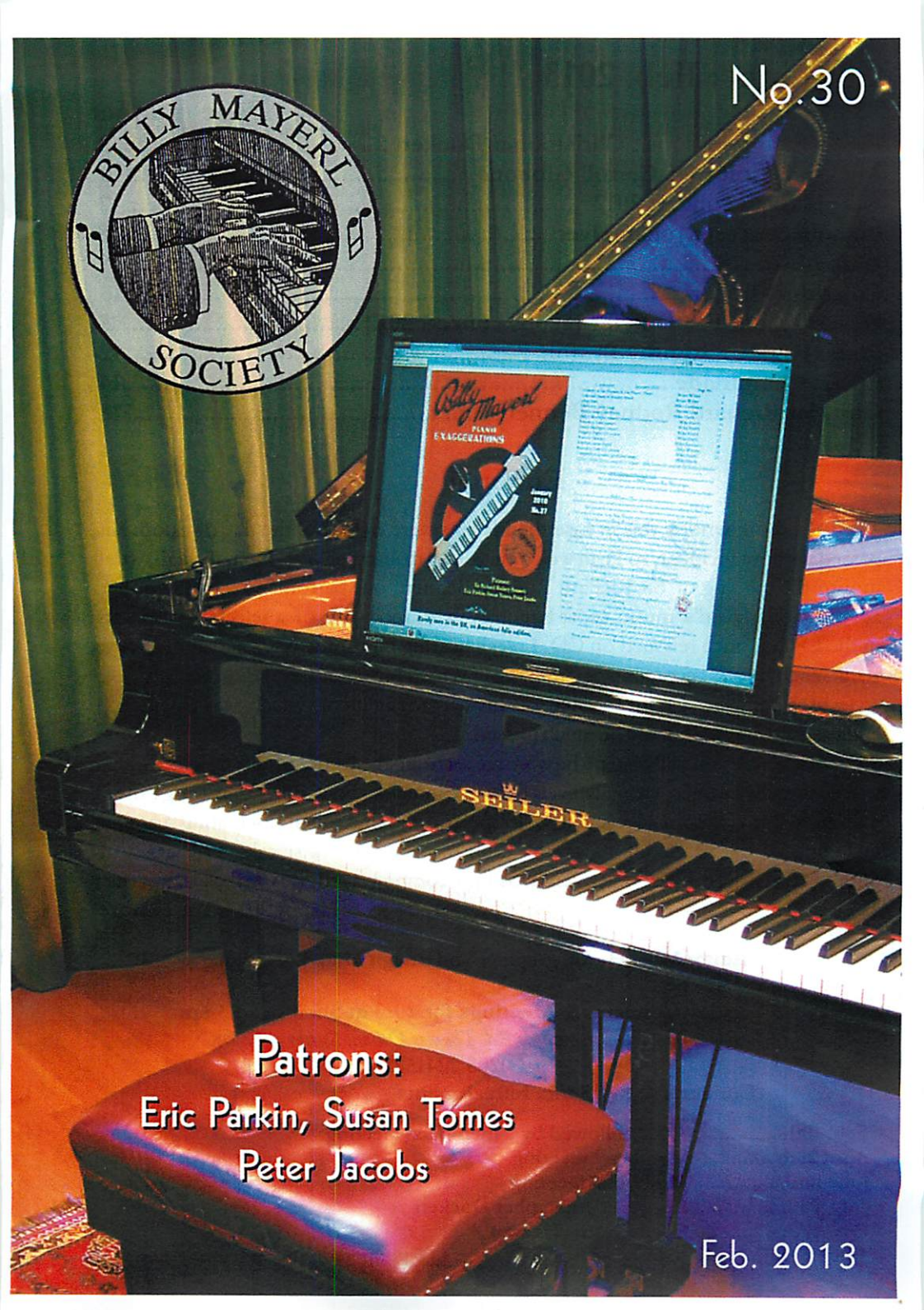

BILLY MAYERL SOCIETY
No.30
Billy Mayerl
PIANO
EXAGGERATIONS
SEILER
Patrons:
Eric Parkin, Susan Tomes
Peter Jacobs
Feb. 2013

# Contents : Feb. 2013





## Editorial

I held off writing this in case the Mayans were right, but the day of doom has passed without incident, so I can welcome you all to another year. First, though, we all mourn the passing of Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, our patron and a distinguished advocate of Mayerl's music, most famously in his recording of a selection of pieces in the LP era, since reissued on CD. I recall hearing him some years ago at the South Bank when he was accompanying the singer Marian Montgomery. I didn't care for her style of singing so I concentrated on his accompaniment, which was fluent and endlessly inventive. He will be much missed.

Elsewhere you will read of how we are securing the future of our website, which will eventually contain virtually everything of interest about Billy. Can I urge those who have not yet taken a look at it to do so? You will find much fascinating material, including all the past editions of the Club magazine and a sizeable collection of photos, and if you haven't yet ventured into computerland, this makes the perfect excuse. Happy 2013. The Editor

**Editor Mike Harth, graphics and design Mike Lorenzini.**

**Sunday Concerts & Meetings for 2013 at Shellwood 3-6pm**
*Shellwood, Saint Leonards Rd. Thames Ditton, Surrey KT7 0RN*
*tel:* 0208 2241521
**Concerts are £15 inc. refreshments** *(payment in advance please)*

**Feb. 10th ..... AGM followed by a members' meeting**
**April 28th ..... Members' meeting**
**June 2nd ..... Members' meeting**
**July 28th ..... Concert Christopher Duckett**
**Oct. 27th ..... Concert Alex Hassan**
**Dec. 15th ..... Members' Xmas Concert (£5 per person inc. refreshments)**

**SWCD42 Piano Exaggerations**
**Christopher Duckett**

This is my first review for the society and I feel very privileged to have been asked to give my considered opinion on the masterful performances presented on this album.

Back in the good old days of the early 1950s I was a BBC sound engineer, often working with Billy Mayerl on his frequent broadcast recitals and thus became very familiar with his music, his style, his energy and dexterity. This album is a reincarnation of all I recall he possessed, for Christopher Duckett's performances are simply amazing. To say that many of Billy's compositions are challenging is probably the most obvious truism you will ever find and Christoph er takes them all in his stride so completely it is hard to believe he wasn't tutored by the Master himself.

With all the many occasions on which I worked with Billy I never heard him seriously rehearse an item in full; he might take a run or two at a section of the score that looked like a blackberry bush, but it was generally more to acquaint himself with the feel of the piano than to brush up on his own technical ability, though I often wondered what his own private rehearsals were like.

The selection of items is most tastefully mixed from the familiar and the less well-known, and every work is executed with perfect precision.

Mike Harth's descriptive sleeve notes are extremely lucid, leaving little for me to further expand. The majority of Billy's titles have always intrigued me; *Antiquary* is supposedly dedicated to a blended scotch whisky brand, but I detect no hint of Scottishness in the composition; perhaps it was just the liquid influence that inspired!

There has long been controversy about the tempo of *Sleepy Piano*. As Mike Harth has pointed out, Billy's own up-tempo recording was misleading and I am most happy to accept the Duckett version as the right one; rather more dreamy than sleepy, and ideal.

So, amidst all this praise do I have any reservations? To be honest I would have to nit-pick to find them. Perhaps I might have wished that the first section of *Song of the Fir Tree* had been a shade more lyrical but I am truly scratching for a criticism. The whole album is perfection: the selection and most certainly the performances. I am in awe of them all.

**Brian Willey 2012**


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Jazzaristrix | 2.02 |
| 2 | Sweet William | 2.14 |
| 3 | Song Of The Fir Tree | 2.57 |
| 4 | Bats In The Belfry | 1.59 |
| 5 | Loose Elbows | 2.10 |
| 6 | Cobweb | 3.26 |
| 7 | Antiquary | 2.16 |
| 8 | Evening Primrose | 3.58 |
| 9 | Hollyhock | 1.51 |
| 10 | Body And Soul | 4.45 |
| 11 | Railroad Rhythm | 3.00 |
| 12 | Shallow Waters | 3.38 |
| 13 | Honky Tonk | 2.53 |
| 14 | Nimble - Fingered Gentleman | 3.38 |
| 15 | Sleepy Piano | 3.26 |
| 16 | Marigold | 2.28 |

**Total playing time .....46.51**

**Available from : www.shellwood.co.uk**

## The Life and Times of Carroll Gibbons

I suppose it could be said that Carroll Gibbons and Billy Mayerl led somewhat parallel lives, born close to the start of the 20th century just seven months apart. Admittedly they came from either side of the Atlantic, but both secured their fame and fortune as outstanding pianists, composers and bandleaders in London and associated with the Savoy Hotel. In 1934 Wills's Cigarettes issued a card album, 'Radio Celebrities' and coincidently placed Billy's and Carroll's cards side by side. They each possessed a quiet manner, enjoyed a drink or two (or even three) and sadly both died in their fifties, far too young for the world to lose their talent.

Born on January 4th 1903 in Clinton, Massachusetts, Carroll began studying music at an early age and later at the Boston Conservatory of Music. He came to Britain in 1924 with his great friend, the saxophonist and vocalist Rudy Vallée, who had been invited to join the Savoy Havana Band. Once known that Vallée's modest friend was a piano player, Gibbons was offered a job in Howard Jacobs' Band at the Berkeley Hotel and regularly appeared as pianist on studio recordings with the Savoy Orpheans.

Although Carroll Gibbons' name was to become almost synonymous with the Savoy Hotel, it was not an immediate continuous association. He initially directed an elite group known as the Savoy Sylvians before becoming the musical director of the Savoy Orpheans in January 1927. Under his baton the Orpheans made records for HMV to the close of 1927, then left to tour Germany, recorded six sides for Homochord in Berlin and on returning home disbanded in the spring of 1928.

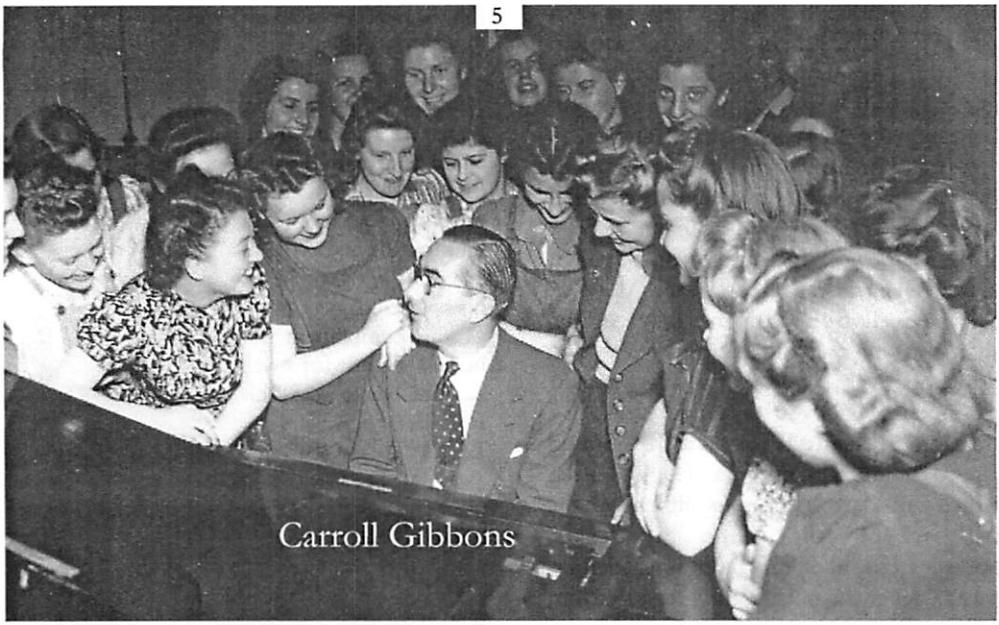
Carroll was immediately head-hunted by His Master's Voice records to be its Director of Light Music then a highly prestigious position and immediately revived and re-formed the company's New Mayfair Dance Orchestra.

By the early 1930s he was to be found back in his native America in Hollywood this time, and contracted to M-G-M films as a staff composer. The move had been prompted by his earlier work in the UK for the British & Dominion Film Company and, although he wrote for about a dozen films, very little has survived.

Whilst in the States he also found time for some New York moon-lighting by directing recordings for the RCA Victor Company, but these prestigious jobs were to be short-lived. London had captivated him and some eighteen months later he returned to form a new Savoy Hotel Orpheans Orchestra and it was this time that the continuous Savoy association truly commenced.

The early 1930s were an exciting radio period, for the BBC was in full swing with its regular nightly broadcasts of London's finest club and hotel dance bands and Carroll Gibbons and the Savoy Hotel Orpheans were much in demand. Once you had heard the soft warm drawl of his introduction, "Hello Ev'rybody", you knew your listening pleasure was in safe hands. Commercial programmes, broadcast from Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandy, were also very much a part of Carroll's life. Usually with a smaller band known as Carroll Gibbons and his Boyfriends, a whole host of famous household-product sponsors Hartley's Jam, Colgate toothpaste, Bush radio, all sought his services to provide the music with which to sell their wares. His impeccable choice of musicians brought to the fore such names as George Melachrino (saxophone and vocals), Ian Stewart (piano), Eugene Pini (violin), Paul Fenoulhet (trombone), and Ray Davies (trumpet) just a few who later became bandleaders in their own right.

Radio shows required a signature tune and improvising one day he jotted down some notes, took the tune to publisher Jimmy Campbell who, with his associate Reg Connelly wrote some appropriate words and *On The Air* was created. As a composer, Carroll was reasonably prolific with around 100 published copyrights but sadly not many have entered the standard catalogue and survived the musical ravages of time.


Carroll Gibbons

His main collaborator was Jimmy Dyrenforth, a prolific American lyricist who had also successfully made his home and reputation in London. Of the many songs they composed *Garden in the Rain* is perhaps the one that best stood the test of time. Composed in 1928 and originally recorded by the Romanian light tenor and film actor, George Metaxa, it was revived in the 1940s by U.S stars Connie Francis and Perry Como.

In the summer of 1939 Carroll took a holiday in the States but, upon the commencement of World War II, he hastily returned to London and there he remained throughout the hostilities, busying himself at the Savoy, plus touring and conducting occasional West End theatre productions.

In 1936 he had married Mrs Joan Critchley, a divorcee with a young son and daughter, but the marriage was short-lived and from then on Carroll, although well-known as a 'ladies-man', appeared to remain content as a confirmed bachelor but that was to change just after the war.

It was then that Impresario Leslie Henson produced 'Gaieties', a variety show which initially toured France and the Netherlands before being staged in the old Drury Lane Winter Garden, a now demolished London theatre. Carroll was invited to conduct the orchestra and, as a result, found a new love in his life. On the cast list of the show was an attractive petite young singer, dancer and piano-accordionist, Miss Joan Lidstone, professionally known as Joan Alexis. Carroll formed a firm friendship with her and, although almost twenty years his junior, they eventually married in 1951 at Marylebone Registry Office.

That decade had begun well for Carroll. The Savoy's Directors had promoted him to the position of Director of Entertainments for its entire Group of Hotels and his popularity, promotion and new marriage made everything set fair for what should be a glittering future.

In January 1952 BBC Radio's 'Desert Island Discs' invited him as a 'castaway' and in conversation with Roy Plomley his chosen composers were Tschaikowsky, Chopin, Rachmaninoff and Puccini; vocalists Bing Crosby and Les Howard; arrangers George Melachrino and Robert Farnon; and his luxury material possession would be manuscript paper. Devotion to the art of music whatever the circumstances! As a

complete contrast, Billy Mayerl appeared as a 'castaway' in 1958 and his choice luxury item was nothing less than a fully-stocked cocktail cabinet! Devotion to another art for sure but it could equally have been Carroll's choice!

A friend of mine joined the orchestra in 1952 and his rules of engagement. seemed quite rigorous playing times from 9.15pm until 2.30am; no dance music on Sundays; cabaret rehearsals at 2.00pm each Monday; no deputies allowed; Christmas Day working and, if through unavoidable causes less than normal hours are required, the salary abated in proportion. Salary to be £22 per week.

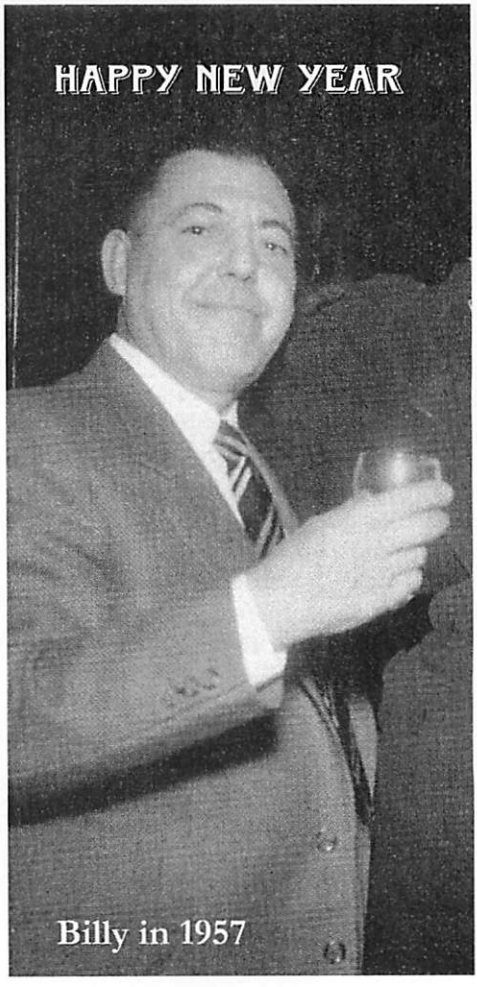
During the early 1950s, as a BBC Sound Balance Engineer, to my great delight, I often worked with Carroll Gibbons, either with the band or his solo piano broadcasts. Sophisticated and dignified yet most friendly, he was a delightful person and I regarded him and his talent with great admiration. Thus, on May 10th 1954, like many millions of his aficionados, I was truly shocked at the news of his sudden death from heart failure at the age of 51.

The legend may have ended, but 58 years on he is at least remembered by a small photo in the new Savoy archive containing treasured artefacts associated with all aspects of the hotel's history. Very little memory of its musical years are on exhibit and the white Steinway grand piano that Carroll played from 1926 to 1954 is sadly no longer to be seen. Prior to the Savoy's recent closure it had been kept in a corner of the River Room and when the hotel reopened in October 2010 the piano was re-sited in the American Bar but not for long. With over eighty years of hard use and in poor condition it required daily tuning and had become totally uneconomic to maintain. Replaced by a new black Kawai grand, there is nothing now to reflect the former glory of the golden dance band days, but fortunately the music abounds on many C'Ds to recall the unique talent of the genial Mr Carroll Gibbons.



Billy Mayerl appeared on Desert Island discs in 1958 choosing pieces by Milhaud, Stravinsky and Ravel etc., asking if he could take Sari Barabas the famous Hungarian ballerina/soprano with him for his luxury item. We don't know if she or his wife Gilda was aware of this compliment but he had to settle for a well stocked bar to make his notorious cocktails.
Born 1914 died 2012

Sári Barabás in Die Entführung



Billy in 1957

## Alex Hassan Concert April 15th 2012
### 'The Greatest Songs You've Never Heard'

Alex is a regular and very welcome visitor to the BMS, and we can always rely on him to come up with something new to us, though on this occasion he started off with an old friend, his medley of songs by Harry Warren, a name not as well known as that of other great American song composers, largely I imagine because he didn't write for the stage (though *42nd St* was turned into a stage show quite recently). But many of his melodies are instantly recognised by all but the young, and it was a pleasure to welcome two of my all-time favourites *I'll String Along With You* and the title song of *42nd St*, this last in a a particularly entertaining arrangement.

Then we were into the main thrust of his programme, which featured songs that never had a chance: maybe they were written for a show but weren't used or got dropped, or for a film which in the event never got made, or were overshadowed by other numbers in the same show. Whatever, they have been lurking in obscurity till Alex rescued them, courtesy of the Library of Congress collection, and has been performing them with the aid of a couple of singers, one of them being the well-remembered Doug Bowles from a couple of years ago.

The main part of the recital began with *Two Heads in the Moonlight*, a delightful number by Walter Donaldson which was never used for anything, paired with *Hopeless, Helpless, Lovesick and Blue* by Dave Dreyer, another winner, surprisingly jaunty considering the lyric, which was written for a film that in the event never got made.

*That Certain Woman*, another Harry Warren number, comes from a Bette Davis film *That Certain Woman*, and is in a similar minor mood, but we cheer up with *Don't Tell Me It's Bad*, from a show by Ray Henderson, *Say When*, while Bob Hope was one half of the duet team that originally sang it.

*Good for Nothin' Joe* by Rube Bloom (incidentally another of those addicted to losing his money on the race-track (you never hear of anybody winning, do you?) is a charming number which keeps threatening to go into something else, though not *The Least Little Thing You Do*, a 1935 song by Will Hudson, a romantic number in which Alex went up-tempo in the second chorus.

*You're A Blessing To Me* by Ralph Rainger is another number that was quite possibly doomed to obscurity because of its weak lyric, but melodically it was worthy of the limelight reserved for its companions.

The composer-performer Johnny Green recorded his own elegant arrangement of *This Is Romance* by Vernon Duke, and this was transcribed from the 78 r.p.m. disc, enabling Alex to play it for us today.

Alex never forgets that we are the Billy Mayerl Society, and today he gave us two selections from BM's shows. First was *Sporting Love*, and it was followed by *Twenty to One*. Both these shows were more comedies with music (inspired by Stanley Holloway's interest in horse-racing) than full-blown musical comedies, but Billy's tunes were well up to standard.

That brought us to the interval, when we refreshed the inner man. Then back to the recital room for the second half, which started off with *Honestly*, by the unfamiliar and rather unfortunately named Jerome Pokrass, written for a show called *Satellite* which lasted just the one performance. He was obviously a versatile composer, since this song must surely be very different in style to those he composed for the Red Army before leaving for the USA.

In 1940 at the World Fair there was an exhibit called Gay New Orleans this was of course before that adjective acquired its present-day connotation and *I Touched a Star* was written for this by another little-known team, Roberts and Brainin, while Alex's version really showed its potential.

*Low Down*, originally sung by Susan Hayward, received lively rather than steamy treatment, while *I Knew* by Victor Schertzinger was apparently given an

embarrassingly bad performance on its first appearance in a film entitled *My Woman.*

*You've Got A Certain Something* by the prolific Walter Donaldson was written for a Wallace Beery film entitled *The Good Old Soak,* and the title could have been referring to the song itself, here given a virtuoso performance by the maestro.

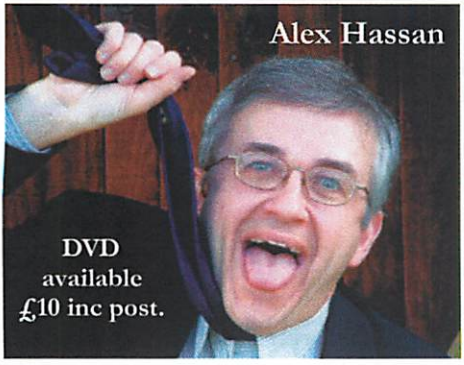
A charming number called *Little You Know* by Milton Ager was discovered by Alex in a pile of music brought to him by a relative of the composer, who of course was then treated to an off-the-cuff performance of that and numerous other numbers.

*Blue Serenade* by Burton Lane was intended for a film which was to star Joan Crawford and Clifton Webb, but they didn't get on and the film was scrapped. It's a torch song which sounded as if it would have been a wow in performance, but that's show business.

Alex concluded with a medley of numbers by Jerome Kern which reminded us, if we needed reminding, what a wonderful songwriter he was, and when an encore was demanded obliged with *Let's Swing The Wedding March*, a version of the more than well-known number which was not exactly suitable for a decorous trip down the aisle. Alex is now at some sort of peak: he has reached what looks like a state of effortless fluency when he makes what he does look simple, though we know that in truth it's very far from that. We all wish him well and look forward eagerly to his return.

**Mike Harth 2012**

You can see a video of Alex playing *Let's Swing The Wedding March* on Youtube. Enter **inizerol** in the search.






## Pianola concert by Julian Dyer July 1st 2012

I don't understand why pianola recitals are so poorly attended: they give us the chance of hearing repertoire that's not available any other way on top-flight instruments played by an expert pianolist, and this recital was, needless to say, no exception. It was also the last chance to hear it in action, as the pianola has been sold, so that your only chance to hear it now will be via one of Shellwood's CDs.

Julian, by now a familiar figure on whom we knew we could rely for expert playing, started his recital with what we might call a respectful arrangement, by the ubiquitous J Lawrence Cook, of the main section of *Grieg's Piano Concerto* as a Foxtrot. *Too Much Ginger*, which followed, was in contrast a hand-played roll, lively and fun, while the *Nifty Foxtrot medley* that came next was compiled in the early days of the foxtrot's popularity.

*Turn on the Heat* is clearly a dance number, while Zez Confrey livens up a somewhat staid ballad, *By the Waters of Minnetonka*, with continually inventive passage-work: this was before he wrote *Kitten on the Keys* and no doubt priced himself out of this kind of work.

I have fond memories of the next piece, Zamecknik's *Polly*, since Mike Lorenzini and I chose it on the very first occasion we played two pianos in public. It's a novelty, whereas *Southern Rose* is actually Billy's first song-hit, and Julian told us he acquired the roll in the USA and didn't think it was ever available over here, which seems odd.

*Peace of Mind* was written by Carroll Gibbons when he was in America trying his hand at writing film music. Unfortunately he never recorded any piano rolls, and this was played by Frank Milne. *Funny Face medley*, which came next, was played by Victor Arden, and the playing could hardly be more authentic since he and his duo-partner Phil Ohman were the accompaniment for the stage production. It contains one well-remembered number after another.

*Innominate Rag* is perhaps the most modern piece of all those played here today. It was written in response to a request for new compositions which would be suitable for transfer to piano roll. also modern was *Waltz No 2* by Shostakovich, in his light music style, while the *Prelude* by Kapustin seems nearer to modern jazz.

Then J Lawrence Cook gave us his take on *Dark Eyes*, after which came *American in Paris*, long enough to need a couple of rolls, and thus reminiscent of the days when one had to turn over an LP. It comes over surprisingly well in this arrangement

Unlike most tango, *La Cumparsita* actually originated in South America, in this case Uruguay, though it took a couple of years for it to become a world-wide hit. In contrast, *Little Peach* is a lively arrangement of a song by Sigmund Romberg, of *Desert Song* fame, while we enter a rather different world with *Caldonia*, from 1944. Apparently this was the first piece of music which used the phrase rock-and-roll.

Back to our period, the next roll was particularly nostalgic, being one of a series of collections of *Signature Tunes*. There are three here, all of them instantly recognisable, and no doubt most of us can not only name the numbers but assign them correctly. Then the *Trolley Song* comes from the film *Meet Me in St Louis*, with Judy Garland, here given a top-flight arrangement.

*You're the Top* comes from the Cole Porter show *Anything Goes*, one of his finest, and is played fairly straight, probably the best thing to do with it. The recital concluded with *Slap That Bass*, a Gershwin number danced by the inescapable Fred Astaire.

For an encore Julian gave us an example of the legendary Dick Hyman's virtuosity in *Bach Up To Me*, bringing to a finish an entertaining recital which fortunately is available on DVD from Shellwood at £10 inc. postage in the UK.

**Mike Harth 2012**

## BMS Business

As you can see from this magazine's cover things are happening that might bring substantial changes to the groaning shelves of sheet music some of us have in our homes.

What you see is a monitor mounted on the grand piano in the music room at Shellwood, it has a miniature computer attached to its back and it's worked by a radio controlled mouse plus a knee operated pedal or knedal as I prefer to call it. Using the software programme Acrobat X Standard I have scanned my entire music collection into PDF format which enables me to have music up on the monitor and turn the now digital pages with my knee via the knedal quickly and efficiently. As well as all this you may have noticed that on the monitor screen there is a page from **www.billymayerlsociety.co.uk** it is the 2011 BMS magazine Cover. Just before I took this photo I'd been looking at some of the sheet music covers on the website and was able to click on links to YouTube and listen to performances of Billy's music all without leaving the piano stool.

Some littlewhile ago the committeeand I decided that we should concentrate on promoting Billy's music rather than collecting original pieces to archive, this was encouraged by the fact very few members ever availed themselves of it and with a burgeoning website being expanded by BMS member Roy Wainwright (our webmaster) with all the Billy memorabilia that has been scanned it seemed the obvious way forward.

Next stop was to photograph, valueand describe all the pieces, no small task but absolutely necessary for the transfer to eBay where I'm pleased to say they are attracting good prices. The money will go towards maintenance and preserving the website for at least 20 years ahead plus enhancing the musical activities for the members.

**Mike Lorenzini 2012**

## Coleridge-Taylor

Regular readers of this magazine may remember that I included a section on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in my series on British Light Music, and I was more than a little surprised as well as delighted when Donald McLeod chose him as the subject for one of his weekly series Composer of the Week on Radio 3. I make a point of listening to these programmes: they are well researched and quite often I learn facts which are new to me or I hear pieces with which I am unfamiliar, and occasionally these lead to my delving further.

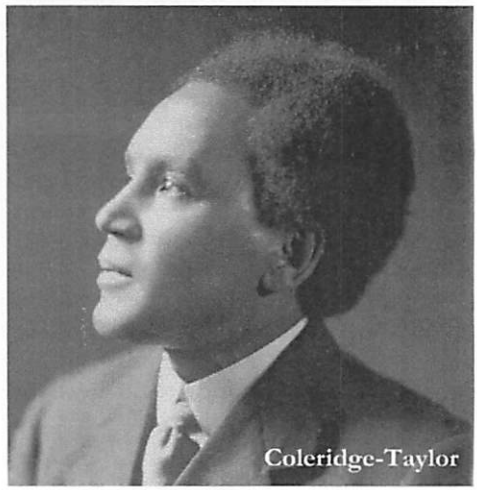
This particular series of five programmes will certainly have that effect: in fact, before I heard them I had no idea just how much of Coleridge-Taylor's music has already been recorded. Certainly there was more than enough to fill five hour-long sessions.

I didn't realise, for instance, that he had written a symphony when he was only nineteen, if I remember correctly and the single movement that Donald played was sufficient to persuade me to add it to my wants list.

We heard that in the twenties and thirties his cantata *Hiawatha* (based of course on Longfellow's poem) was so popular that there were annual Hiawatha fortnights, but unfortunately too late for the composer, who had died at the tragically early age of thirty-seven, and in any case had earlier sold the copyright outright for fifteen guineas. I don't know whether any of you have the disc of C-T's music in the British Light Music series, and even if you have you may not be interested in the classical repertoire, but if you are, I can heartily recommend further investigation. Coleridge-Taylor's favourite composer was Dvorak, and his influence can be easily discerned in many of C-T's own compositions, which show the same rich flow of melody and warm orchestral colouring.

I have now acquired a disc of his Violin Concerto. The composer never heard it, as he died before the first performance, and it is rarely heard, though it was played at the Proms a few years ago. It is a charming work, very lyrical, and well worth a look. He also wrote a good deal of chamber music: the renowned Nash Ensemble have made several recordings of this, and I am looking out for them.

Listening to this music, I can't help wondering why there is nothing equivalent today. I can't think of a single contemporary composer in the classical field who produces works that give pleasure without being trivial or vapid. On those occasions when I manage to sit through a present-day composition without either switching over or off, the audience duly applauds something that would only have elicited at best silence and at worst boos or hisses from me, and I wonder is it because I am out of touch? I have just about given up on new music: whatever the composers had in mind when they were writing it, I doubt very much whether a wish to give pleasure was part of it. **Mike Harth**



Coleridge-Taylor

## Desert Island Billy: Peter Jacobs November 11th 2012

It was a real pleasure for us to welcome back Peter Jacobs to give his fourth recital for the BMS. This time he took as his start-off point Billy's choices on his Desert Island Disc appearance, playing pieces by four composers that Billy picked on that occasion.

He started off with *Three Studies* by Roger Quilter. Though I of course knew a number of his songs as well as his delightful *Children's Overture*, I had never before come across any of his piano music, and the *Three Studies* were a welcome novelty. Restrained in style, as one might expect from this composer, they were all melodic, with my favourite being the first of the set. They were followed by Fred Hartley in gender-bending mood with his *Dreamy Afternoon*, which for some reason was issued under the name Iris Taylor, here given a particularly beautiful reading. An abrupt change of mood came with Billy's *Trapeze*, the brilliant toccata-like finale of his *Big Top Suite*, performed with the requisite brilliance.

Ronnie Munro's *Punch and Judy Polka* is an example of the sort of orchestral novelties that were popular in the forties and fifties. This one has good tunes and also plays well in its piano version, not always the case. The next piece was somewhat antithetical, lacking even an approximation to a tune. I must confess Stravinsky is one of my blind spots: lacking either the ability or desire (perhaps both) to write tunes or even melodies, his other qualities are for me insufficient to make me want to listen to his compositions, even though I know Billy admired him. The *Romanza* that Peter chose was mercifully far from one of his more discordant pieces.

Modern music that I could enjoy followed. Milhaud's *Saudades de Brasil* are all bitonal: they are written in two different keys at once. I was not surprised to learn that they were originally written for two pianos: they seem tailor-made for that medium. But Peter handled this solo piano version very well and I found them very enjoyable of course the Brazilian rhythms make the discords much easier to accept.

One of Billy's arrangements followed, the *Swedish Rhapsody* by Charles Wildman, a fairly typical example of the rash of mini-concertos that followed in the wake of the enormous success of the *Warsaw Concerto*, and the first half closed with *Wisteria*, one of Billy's numerous pieces with flower titles.

The second half opened with *Ragamuffin*, the middle one of John Ireland's *Three London Pieces*, lively and cheeky as befits the title. Billy's *Pastoral Sketches* is in the same tradition; the opening *Legend* one of those gorgeous slow melodies for which he had a gift, *Lover's Legend* more lively and beautifully written for the piano, and the concluding *Village Festival* lively and bustling.

Though Billy didn't choose any Chopin to keep him company on his desert island, he did record a few of the Preludes, and Peter followed up on this by playing the *Ballade No 3*. These ballades are among Chopin's finest works: indeed I believe that No 1 was Chopin's own favourite of all his works, and mine, but No 3 is almost as good.

It was followed by 4 pieces from Chaminade's *Album des Enfants* which were too short for me: I would have liked more of this composer, whom Peter plays particularly well. Billy's version of that well-loved ballad *The Bells of St Mary's*, which followed, is one of his most endearing transcriptions, and it was a treat to hear it here, especially as it was followed by a very different style of piece, *April's Fool*.

For an encore we were given Chopin's *Mazurka in C sharp minor* to conclude a very interesting mix. I'm sure we all look forward to Peter's next visit. **Mike Harth 2012**

There is a video clip from the concert on YouTube, enter inizerol in the search.

**You can buy a DVD of the entire Peter Jacobs concert price £10 inc postage. Ring 020 8224 1521 to place your order.**

In writing this article I've deviated from the usual pattern in that instead of discussing an international artist known to many I've selected a pianist who was brilliant in his heyday and adored by his fans but was famous only in the part of the "Black Country" in which he was born and brought up, namely Wolverhampton. The only exceptions were with a relatively small number of jazz aficionados who visit jazz clubs and jazz festivals. He was known in some circles as "The English Fats Waller". Tommy adored Fats and managed to emulate him in a remarkably similar style. He was a brilliant exponent of the Stride Piano style. One can only speculate on the reasons for his failure to gain popularity with the general public but it was probably the fact that his style of playing was not in fashion and accounted for his lack of a recording contract with a major record company. Personally, I never had the pleasure of seeing him in action and was blissfully unaware of his existence until a friend gave me a tape which had been on sale at one of Tommy's concerts. I was absolutely "bowled over" by the recorded performances and set about finding out more.

However, to start at the beginning, Thomas William Burton was born in Bilston nr. Wolverhampton on January the 10th 1935 into a musical family. His maternal grandfather was an accomplished organist and pianist. His maternal grandmother was also a pianist and her two sisters played the harp while her two brothers were excellent violinists. His mother loved opera whilst his father saw himself as Jack Buchanan, the musical star of the 1920's and 30's.Tommy was brought up in a musical atmosphere from a very early age. He had piano lessons from the age of eight with a local piano teacher Miss Anne Riley. Tommy quickly learnt the rudiments of piano playing from Miss Riley but it was a retired dance Band musician by the name of Alfred Norman who taught him about jazz and dance music. Tommy absorbed all this very quickly since he was a gifted pupil to whom it came easily. Tommy wasn't content to confine his musical activities to the piano because at the age of fifteen he took clarinet lessons followed by alto sax tuition at sixteen. He was now ready to put his musical skills to the test and played his first gig on clarinet and alto sax with Pete Young and his Chittelling Twisters on the back of a float in the Wolverhampton Carnival. Subsequently, he took over the piano chair with Johnny Fenton and the Fentones until he was called up for service in the RAF Service at the age of eighteen.

The RAF provided a wonderful opportunity for Tommy to hone his piano playing skills and also learn to play guitar. During his five years service he organized various service dance bands and made his first broadcast on a Forces Show which happened to feature Humphrey Lyttelton. It would be the first of many. In the latter stages of his RAF service he led Thunderfoot Burton's Celestial Three in Walsall in a bid to tap into the Rock *n'* Roll market. Tommy commented on his reason for this new departure *My original band was very much modelled on the formation of Bill Haley and the Comets. I thought that if Bill Haley could be so successful, surely a local band which played a similar style to Bill Haley would also be successful.*

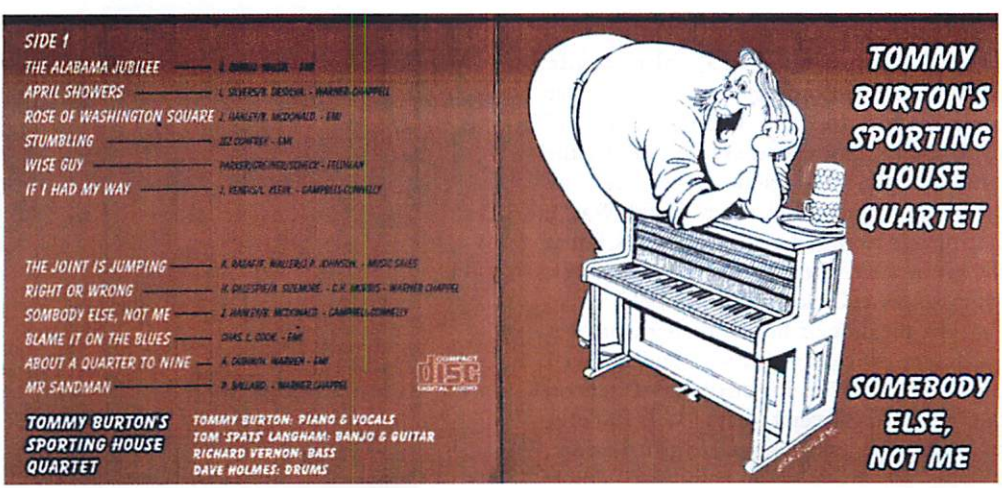
On being demobbed in 1958 he led his own Ravemen on guitar and vocals and then fronted his own combo on tenor sax and vocals during the 1960's. Tommy formed his

Sporting House Quartet in the late 1960's which proved to be his most popular group and this carried on into the late 1990's. It provided a wonderful opportunity for Tommy to show off his stylish piano playing. It was this formation which featured the Waller-inspired repertoire and Tommy's quirky vocals with his risque humour in the lyrics. In the 1960's he secured for the SHQ an extended contract to appear on the BBC's "Pebble Milll at One" TV programme. He is best remembered today for this band. In 1989 he began a series of regular visits to New Orleans as a performer where he guested with various local musicians on piano and played in marching bands on alto sax. In 1995-6 he was accompanied by virtuoso banjoist and guitarist Thomas "Spats" Langham who had been a cornerstone of his Sporting House Quartet since its inception. By all accounts, his trips to New Orleans were always a great success particularly at Fritzel's in Bourbon Street. Unfortunately there weren't any Sporting Houses left on Tommy's visits.

Having been introduced to London Jazz Club audiences he became a firm favourite at the 100 Club in Oxford Street where he was a sell-out attraction for nine successive years for their New Years Eve show. From 1972 to 1978 he ran a public house, the Lord Raglan in Wolverhampton. Tommy's hectic lifestyle finally caught up with him in 1999 when he suffered a stroke from which he made a good recovery; enough to allow him to appear at the Upton-on-Severn Jazz festival in June 2000. In the week of his death in September he made a successful appearance at the Bude Jazz festival, he died a few days later on the 3rd September 2000 just 65 years old. He may not have been a household name in his lifetime but to those who knew him he was not only a gifted multi instrumentalist but a consummate entertainer who would remain in their memories for a very long time.

At the time of writing these notes there are some very good examples of Tommy Burton's piano playing and singing with the Sporting House Quartet on YouTube. I can recommend *I Wanna Be Like You* from Disney's Jungle Book and *Someone Else Not Me* which is in good quality video.

**John Archer 2012**



# Cecile Chaminade



Hearing some of Chaminade's pieces played by Peter Jacobs at his recent BM recital reminded me that I had been meaning to look into her work for some time so, striking while the iron was hot, I got hold of a recording, which was also by Peter: the second of his discs completely devoted to this composer.

Cécile Chaminade was born on 8 August 1857 into a non-musical family and was taught music privately since her father disapproved of her musical education. However, in her eighth year she played some of her sacred music to Georges Bizet, the composer of Carmen, who was much impressed with her talents. She gave her first concert when she was eighteen, touring France several times in those earlier days and making her début in England in 1892. From that time on her work as a composer gained steadily in favor. She wrote mostly character pieces for piano, and salon songs, almost all of which were published.

She composed a Konzertstück for piano and orchestra, the ballet music to *Callirhoé* and other orchestral works. Her songs, such as *The Silver Ring* and *Ritournelle*, were also great favorites. She married a music publisher from Marseilles, Louis-Mathieu Carbonel, in 1901, though on account of his advanced age the marriage was rumoured to be one of convenience. He died in 1907, and Chaminade did not remarry.

In London, 1903, she made gramophone recordings of six of her compositions for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company; these are among the most sought-after piano recordings by collectors. Before and after World War I, Chaminade recorded many piano rolls, but as she grew older, she composed less and less, dying in Monte Carlo on 13 April 1944.

By the time of her death, her work was starting to go out of fashion, and in fact I can't remember hearing anything of hers on the radio for several years. It is tuneful, stylish, elegant, and designed to give pleasure, a type of music that has, alas, almost disappeared. Almost all of it is designed to be playable by amateurs of moderate ability, and So it is well worth those of us who play piano looking for it in second-hand music shops and elsewhere.

Peter's well-filled disc (Hyperion CDA66706) contains nineteen pieces, starting with a typical *Arlequin*. Like nearly all these pieces, it is in ternary form and lasts under three minutes. I particularly enjoyed the *Scherzo-valse Op 148*, the *Valse Tendre Op 119* and the *Gigue Op 43*, while the most extended number on this disc is *Au Pays Devasté*, a late work at Op 155.

*Tristesse, Op 104*, has an unexpectedly perky middle section, and the disc concludes with two of the set of *Concert Studies Op 35: No 5, Impromptu* and *No 6, Tarantelle*. It is clear from this collection that though the composer lived well into the ragtime era, she remained totally unaffected by it: there is no trace of its influence in any of these pieces.

I have always thought of Peter as at his best in larger, more extended works, but here he displays a sensitivity and an elegance ideally suited to the music, and the disc can be recommended to all lovers of light music.

**Mike Harth 2012**

## Fancy That!

Just a couple of items of passing interest, a relation of mine in Leeds, who now owns Billy's Steinway grand, has recently remarried. His new father-in-law is a piano dealer and restorer who provides pianos for the Leeds International Piano Competition. He is going to give the old instrument a full refurbishment. I was looking at the comments etc. in the School Club Magazine for March 1936 regarding a competition that Billy set that January. On page 23 is a response to the offering by (Dr.)F.S.Mooney, my relation's father! Hey-ho!

*BMS Webmaster:* **Roy Wainwright**

## EBay: prices

It may interest you to know of the latest prices being paid for Billy'ssheet music.

| | |
|---|---|
| Peg O'My Heart | £67 |
| Beguine Impromptu | £41 |
| Jack In The Box | £45 |
| Pastorale Exotique | £52 |
| Blue Shadows | £77 |
| Three Japanese Pictures | £58 |
| Honky-Tonk | £36 |
| Parade Of The Sandwich-Board Men | £36 |
| WeddingOf An Ant | £46 |
| Bound Vol 1934 BMS Mag. | £155 |

In all the above the condition was good and the majority of purchasers were Americans, proving the strength of interest in Billy'smusic in the USA.

**Mike Lorenzini**

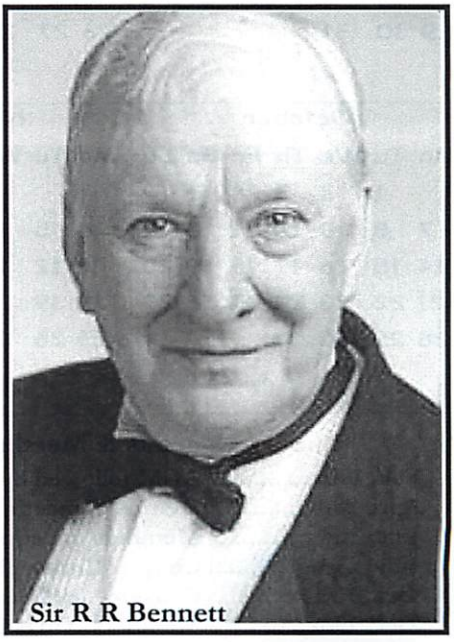

## Obit. : Richard Rodney Bennett 1936 - 2012

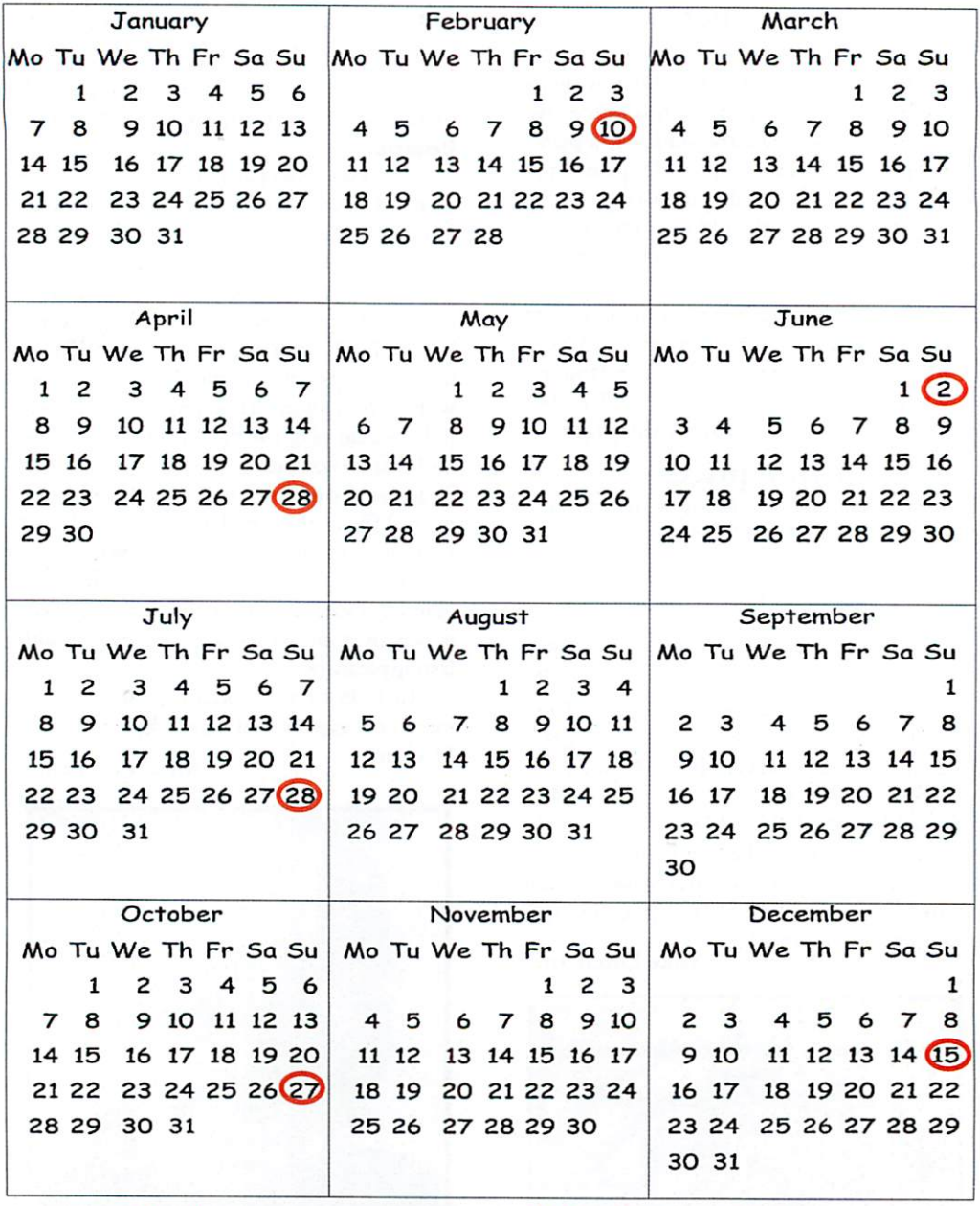
No doubt you will have read of the death of one of our patrons, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett.

He was a charming man who can be credited with kick-starting the current interest in Billy Mayerl's compositions. His 1975 Polydor LP which contains one side of Mayerl and one of Gershwin was a clarion call to pianists everywhere. When I phoned him in his New York home to ask him to become a patron of the BMS he agreed without hesitation. Touchingly when I asked if he would play for the society one day he said that he was unable to reach the standard he achieved on the LP anymore and it was the most difficult thing he had ever recorded. A sentiment many of us mere mortals will understand. Mike Harth and I will always be grateful for his 2 piano work *Four Piece Suite,* which over the years we have played with lasting pleasure.

In 1995 he was voted one of the most influential gay musical figures by Gay Times Magazine.

**Mike Lorenzini**


Sir R R Bennett




Sunday Concerts & Meetings for 2013 at Shellwood 3-6pm

Feb. 10th ..... AGM followed by a members' meeting
April 28th ..... Members' meeting
June 2nd ..... Members' meeting
July 28th ..... Concert Christopher Duckett
Oct. 27th ..... Concert Alex Hassan
Dec. 15th ..... Members' Xmas Concert (£5 per person inc. refreshments)