

BILLY MAYERL

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Billy Joseph Mayerl was born in London on 31 May 1902. He showed some talent at the piano as a child and, at the age of seven, entered Trinity College more as a curiosity than a budding pianist. By the time of the Great War, he was playing the piano for silent films and at dancing events.



He was attracted to American music of the frivolous and non-serious type. In 1921 he joined a hotel band in Southampton playing the popular tunes of the day. He later joined the Savoy Havana band and became very popular as a performer and bandleader with the songs of the day.

He loved the sexiness of American dance and was something of a voyeur enjoying the rise of the skirt and the flash of thighs and underwear of dancing girls as members of his band testified.

At no time did he identify himself with any music of quality. Beethoven, Brahms and Liszt were far beyond him and his aesthetic and technique. He was not a concert pianist or ever could be although he gave the unsuccessful London premiere of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

Mayerl opened his School of Syncopation but only taught popular styles such as ragtime and jazz piano. He could not teach quality music if he tried. He was an arrogant man publishing a correspondence course How to Play Like Billy Mayerl and it is said that in all its years this course had 30,000 students until it closed in 1957. It was obviously a school for those who could not make it as concert pianists as many such students have admitted. It did not teach the baroque, classical or romantic worthy repertoires. It centred on cheap and cheerful music, often the banal and empty music of its time, music of little or no substance. And this is shown in his own music which is certainly banal and superficial such as Marigold of 1927 and over 300 pieces many named after flowers and trees. Marigold is pleasant but soon loses its appeal.

His attempts at works for piano and orchestra such as the Aquarium Suite of 1937 were not successful and, understandably, are seldom heard today, if at all.

In 1926, he appeared with the actress and cellist Gwen Farrar (1899- 1946) in a film singing some of his songs which are also mainly forgotten lacking in any appeal. His music is sometimes pretty and pleasant but, as a comparison, because a girl is pretty and pleasant that does not make her worth knowing. His music is often sickly, repetitive and non-durable. It is banal, lacking in originality and is common. As it has been said, 'His music is not even good enough to be called light music.' His music is decidedly shallow having no depth and not involving anything that is sincere or purposeful.

His music is often corny, unoriginal and sentimental to the state of nausea. Consider some of his titles Sweet Nothings, Ten cents a dance, Mistletoe, Parade of the Sandwich Board men, Dusky Aristocrat, Leprechaun's Leap, Postman's Knock, April 's Fool etc.

He was a radio performer, bandleader who was at home in the music hall and vaudeville.

We become irritated when people state that Mayerl wrote wonderful music and equate him with Bach, Beethoven, Brahms et al. There is no comparison so why do these shallow people say such inane things?

There is good light music as seen in Eric Coates and Haydn Wood for example. There is good music in jazz such as King Oliver and Duke Ellington. There are some wonderful tunes in Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers. There is good pop music in Love, Utopia and Dr Hook... but Billy Mayerl? Sweet Nothings.

He died of a heart attack in Beaconsfield on 25 March 1959