

# **THE MUSIC**

by

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## BILLY THE ARTIST

Before we attempt to comment in detail on Billy's compositions, it may be of interest to examine his artistic personality. He left Trinity College of Music at sixteen, by which time we may assume he had a thorough, if extremely square and conventional, grounding in musical technique. That, coupled with what he would already have heard of the popular music of the day, was obviously sufficient to make it entirely clear to him that the classical field was not his metier, and the fact that there is never a sign of any of the devices of classical composition such as sonata form, fugue, canon, and so on, even in his most 'serious' compositions such as *The Forgotten Forest*, may possibly be to some extent a reaction against the narrow-mindedness of his teachers.

That he had a phenomenal piano-playing technique is obvious as soon as you hear any of his recordings. So, of course, had many of his professional contemporaries in the same field, though of them all only the tragically short-lived Raie da Costa was his equal and perhaps sometimes his better. In such a highly competitive arena, pianists needed to stand out from the crowd, and Billy relied to a considerable extent on his capacity for speed playing. That and the length restrictions of the records of the time largely account for the excessive tempi of some of his recordings: what stands out most, though, if one does a comparison exercise with recorded performances of other light pianists of the period, is his taste and refinement.

Billy never thumped. A lot of the time he would use the 'soft' pedal, and he made a regular practice of pedalling only the first beat of each bar, two techniques that he recommended to his students. So far as one can judge from the dead acoustic of his recordings, he always produced beautiful tone, but even more remarkable is how finely each performance is judged: nothing is in excess: though there is virtuosity, it is always kept subservient to the needs of the music, and in fact his playing is much less flowery or overloaded than most light pianists of his era. The result is a style that some may even find dry, but is in reality classically perfect. Though at times one may prefer the more rhapsodic or ebullient style of a Raie da Costa or a Patricia Rossborough, or the unbuttoned approach of a Fats Waller, one always returns to Billy's performances for more sheerly musical enjoyment, for the feeling that he has got it just right.

Billy never wore his heart on his sleeve, either as a person, a pianist, or a composer. In fact, though he was not of English stock, in many ways his music is quintessentially English, cool, disciplined, understated, but very sure of itself. It is likely that his choices of music for his Desert Island Discs interview gives us some idea of his tastes, and it is noteworthy that there is nothing with any overt emotional content among them, that the only truly 'classical' piece chosen is Stravinsky's *Chant du Rossignol* - which incidentally also demonstrates that he had a high tolerance of dissonance for his period - and that everything is of the present day. If we can say that the romantic uses art to express his emotions, whereas the classicist uses his emotions to produce art, then Billy was firmly in the latter camp.

The mainspring of his music is melody, hardly surprising in one who was gifted in that respect above all his contemporaries except, perhaps, Eric Coates. His melodies are predominantly instrumental in character, though he wrote a number of excellent songs: in this he is the obverse of Gershwin, whose melodies are primarily vocal, though he produced a number of instrumental works. As Billy was not in favour of 'ruining the melody' - see notes to 'Say It' - it isn't surprising that he wasn't attracted towards the jazz idiom, where it is much easier for a good bag of technical tricks to compensate for a lack of melodic inspiration.

Perhaps also a word of thanks is due to his principal publishers, Keith Prowse, who had sufficient faith in him, or the music-buying public, or both, to be willing to print his novelties in all their technical elaboration without, apparently, worrying over the fact that hardly anybody would be able to play them - at least until Billy had set up his School. If this is contrasted with the bare bones that is what one gets of novelties by Zez Confrey or Roy Bargy, for instance, one realises how lucky we are.

The major part of this section is devoted to the piano music because not only is it the largest and most important part of his output, it is also the part that has dated least. There is a widespread notion that it is very difficult to play, which discourages many from attempting it. In fact, it is nothing like so difficult as imagined. Part of the problem arises because the sort of technique needed to play the novelties, in particular, is quite different in many respects from that needed for classical piano works, and thus classically trained pianists tend to find them particularly difficult.

The truth is that it is practically always beautifully laid out for the piano, so that, once one has mastered the essentials of the necessary technique, it is rewarding to play and never any more difficult than necessary to achieve the required effect, unlike the piano writing of so many in both the classical and lighter fields, where extra effort is needed because of a less than ideal layout. The comment was made about another master of writing for the piano, Franz Liszt, that once one had achieved the necessary level of technique, his works practically played themselves, and this seems very appropriate for Billy also. He would recommend to his students that they should spend the first two months of their acquaintance with his style chiefly practising the left hand, and this remains probably the best way to tackle his works.

However, his teaching experience, both through his postal courses and in person, could not but have made him aware that most players found his syncopated works, in particular, difficult to play. He therefore produced two sets of stepping-stones in the form of eighteen Studies in Syncopation, and four suites under the generic title **'In My Garden'**.

Fuller information on the Studies can be found in the Suites and Sets section but, as regards the four In My Garden suites, it may be worth while to quote Billy's own introduction to them, reproduced below:

'Syncopated music, in the modern sense of the word, has long been beyond the ability of the average amateur or beginner largely because of large left-hand stretches, intricate right-hand cadences, placing or should I say misplacing of accents and the awkward 'jumps' covering most of the keyboard which are assumed necessary to display an individual style.

'In writing these little pieces I have endeavoured to avoid all these difficulties without losing to any large degree the desired effect. There are no big stretches, the triplet and dotted-quaver runs lie well under the fingers, accents are marked where best suited and 'jumps' are entirely eliminated. Apart from their value as stepping-stones to greater proficiency, it is hoped that they will prove welcome additions to the repertoire of the piano student.

A word on the organisation of the commentaries. At this early stage of the revival there seems more need to draw attention to his oeuvre, for the benefit of both players and listeners, rather than discuss it in detail. Thus technical comment has been kept to a minimum and there are no music examples. We look forward to a volume of detailed analysis as his compositions become familiar again. The single pieces are dealt with first, those belonging to sets or suites following in the second section, though cross-referenced for ease of use. Then come some remarks on the transcriptions, followed by brief notes on the orchestral and vocal music. Asterisks against various titles are, in the author's opinion, an indication of the appeal and quality of the composition.

Availability of the printed scores of even the piano music is unfortunately something of a problem. Apart from the excellent album **'The Jazz Master'**, which contains twenty-two of his pieces, the only other work currently in print to my knowledge is the transcription of **'Body And Soul'**. It is a sad comment on the state of today's music-publishing industry that, in spite of the fact that the Jazz Master album has sold very well, there is currently no intention of producing a second volume or indeed of reprinting any of Billy's pieces. Regrettably, many publishing houses today seem to be run by accountants rather than people with a genuine interest in publishing, yet publishing, like any other enterprise, surely requires more than mere expertise in money matters.

Photo-copies are indeed available from the respective Publishers' Archives, but the cost of maintaining these collections makes it an expensive way of enlarging one's repertoire. I would urge those interested to join one of the Billy Mayerl Societies, where they will often be able to look at, play over, and sometimes even borrow many of Billy's compositions, as well as other works in similar idiom. They may also find second-hand copies being disposed of much more cheaply than at a music shop, where the prices of the rarer items are now unrealistically high for those whose main interest is in playing them. The Billy Mayerl Society also has an Archive where copies may be inspected or, if there are duplicates, borrowed by members. The contact address of the Society will be found elsewhere on this website.

(see also: 'Publications' on this website).

## THE COMPOSITIONS

### PIANO SOLOS

**Ace of Clubs :** see Four Aces Suite  
**Ace of Diamonds :** see Four Aces Suite  
**Ace of Hearts :** see Four Aces Suite  
**Ace of Spades :** see Four Aces Suite  
**Air de Ballet :** see Musical Moments  
**All-of-a-twist :** see Pianolettes  
**Almond Blossom:** see Three Japanese Pictures  
**Alpine Bluebell:** see In My Garden Suites, Summertime  
**Amber Leaves:** see In My Garden Suites, Autumntime  
**Antiquary :** see Piano Exaggerations.

#### **April's Fool (1945) \*\***

One of Billy's later pieces, this is included in the Jazz Master album: to me a slightly strange choice, particularly since it is pretty difficult. It's marked Allegro veloce: as this is the speed Billy usually played at when the marking was a mere moderato, one wonders what speed he intended for this. The main section of the piece is built up, with great technical skill, out of a five-note phrase. There is a more sostenuto section in the middle.

**April Showers :** see In My Garden Suites, Springtime

#### **Autumn Crocus (1932) \*\*\*\***

This comparatively well-known piece is one of BM's most romantic and tuneful, the main melody being graceful and somehow having a very English feel to it, perhaps more springtime than autumn. The middle section is slower and more emotional, with a return to the main melody to finish off.

#### **Bats in the Belfry (1935) \*\*\*\***

is described as being based on a theme by Austen Croom-Johnson. One assumes this refers to the opening melody, a highly rhythmic figure with a recurring triplet, not easy to bring off with total precision. The two contrasting sections are more syncopated in style and blend in perfectly: one would never know they weren't all by the same composer. This and its companion piece, Green Tulips, were recorded by Billy with Mr. Croom-Johnson on a piano-harpsichord duo. Billy liked the harpsichord, claiming that it was very suited to his brand of syncopation.

**Beetle in the Bottle :** see Insect Oddities

#### **Beguine Impromptu (1952) \*\*\***

The opening section is distinctly classical in style and could almost be by Weber. A 20-bar introduction, lightly virtuosic, leads to a running theme in the minor based on a descending-note motif. This section comes to a full stop on the tonic chord, and is followed directly by the beguine section, in the tonic major. This, like the beguine in Crystal Clear, is not in the typical beguine pattern. Its theme is more sostenuto in style, but decorated with quick-note figurations which remind us of the first section. Some finely judged extra harmonic colour towards the close leads to a dramatic re-assertion of the dominant, D, and a short reprise of the first theme.

**Beside a Rustic Bridge:** see Musical Moments

#### **Blue Shadows (1954) \***

This is in fact an arrangement for piano of the original composition for violin and piano. Very much a salon piece, the sentimental main section seems more suited to the violin than piano: however, the middle section is livelier and more pianistic.

**Canaries' Serenade (1933) \*\*\***

This was written as a compliment to Geoffrey Clayton, who was his partner in the Billy Mayerl School. Geoffrey had a pet canary who was a compulsive singer, and he can be clearly heard in the main section, which is full of trills and runs. The first interlude is not one of Billy's most interesting, but the second is much better with a mixture of bold and piquant harmonies.

**Carminetta (1932) \*\***

Another of Billy's Spanish pieces, the main section is an attractive tango. It's in strong contrast to the middle part, which consists of a slow sustained theme decorated with repeated chords, after which the tango returns for a quiet finish.

**Carpet of Yellow** : see In My Garden Suites, Springtime

**Cherry Blossom** : see In My Garden Suites, Springtime

**Cherry Dance** : see Three Japanese Pictures

**Chopsticks (1927) \*\*\*\***

This, as you might expect, is based on the old piano vamp. It opens with whole-tone harmonies which lead into a version of the title tune, followed by two short interludes more in Billy's novelty style. The chopsticks theme returns, to die away at the bottom of the keyboard.

**Christmas Rose** : see In My Garden Suites, Wintertime

**Clockwork** : see Three Miniatures in Syncopation

**Clowning** : see The Big Top Suite

**Cobweb** : see Three Miniatures in Syncopation

**Cricket Dance** : see Three Dances in Syncopation

**Crystal Clear (1954) \*\*\***

Billy's wife Jill supplied the title for this one, from the impression it made on her when Billy first played it to her. And it does in fact describe the texture well: there is not an excess note. The main theme is in Billy's more classical vein, while the middle section is marked Alla beguine though, as in the Beguine Impromptu, it doesn't display the regular beguine rhythm. This section is dotted with little reminders of the main theme, giving a feeling of organic continuity Billy wouldn't have bothered about in his early years.

**Dancing Horse** : see The Big Top Suite

**English Dance** : see Three Dances in Syncopation

**Entry of the Trick Cyclists** : see The Big Top Suite

**Errant Errand Boy (1954) \*\***

Very much in the style of the orchestral novelties of the period, this is a light little number in 6/8 time which well conveys the mood suggested by the title.

**Eskimo Shivers** : see Pianolettes

**Evening Primrose (1946) \*\*\*\***

A beautiful piece in his lyrical vein, the opening melody needs delicate handling with just enough rubato and no dragging - it's allegretto, not andante. There are two interludes separating repeats of the first theme, all just as beautiful.

**Evergreen** : see In My Garden Suites, Wintertime

**Fantail** : see Aquarium Suite

**Fascinating Ditty** : see Two Stepping Tones

**Fiddle Dance**: see Three Contrasts

**Filigree (1955) \*\*\*\***

Another of the late pieces which makes one regret that Billy didn't write more at this period. One suspects that if the demand had been greater the repertoire would have been enriched with more than the handful of late masterpieces he left us, pieces in which the exuberance and fertility of youth has been replaced by complete mastery and control. After an ad lib introduction, the main theme reveals itself as intricate delicate filigree, in both left and right

hands, in which it seems impossible to sort out whether the main interest lies in the melody or the harmony. Then, after four bars of transition, we get a surprise: Billy uses his old trick of transforming it into a syncopated version, but one with the more astringent harmonies of this period. The four bars of coda provide a beautiful finish to a wonderful piece.

**Fireside Fusiliers (1943) \*\*\***

This was actually inspired by Winston Churchill, when during one of his wartime speeches he used the phrase 'Fireside fusiliers'. Billy was very excited by it and said 'What a wonderful title he has given me.' In keeping with this, it has a fanfare-like opening, leading into a jaunty main theme. The middle section is reached by way of a reminiscence of 'Come to the Cookhouse Door' with whole-tone harmonies and is in quite a different style. The same military fragment is used to round the piece off.

**The First Snowdrop** : see In My Garden Suites, Wintertime

**Forgotten Forest (1945) \*\***

The original version of this was for piano and orchestra, as a sort of tone-poem, and I have to say that, having heard this version, the solo arrangement seems but a pale imitation. The original is one of Billy's more impressive pieces, and there is a letter of his extant (to the conductor Stanford Robinson) in which he states that he considers it the best thing he had written up to that time. However, until this version becomes available again, and, we hope, performed, we will have to be content with this, which is an extended work in Billy's more serious vein, successfully evoking the sort of mood suggested by its title.

**From a Spanish Lattice (1938) \*\*\*\***

Perhaps the most successful of Billy's Spanish pieces, the opening theme has some similarity to that of Autumn Crocus, and is just as attractive, if not particularly Spanish in flavour, a lack made up for by the middle section, which is marked *Tempo di habanera*, and is harmonically more astringent. After this the first section is reprised, and the short coda touches on the habanera rhythm to remind us of the Spanish provenance. Not only is this a very attractive piece, but it has the added recommendation (for most of us) of being one of Billy's easier pieces.

**Funny Peculiar (1957) \*\*\*\***

This piece gives the lie to those who think that Billy was written out by the fifties. He certainly wasn't as prolific as in his earlier years, but the quality was just as high, it was just that the idiom of the time, which this piece in particular shows he could completely take on board, is in itself less interesting. The main theme starts as if it was going to be one of those run-of-the-mill novelties of the period, but all the way through gives convincing evidence of just how high a musical level his mind operated at - in his chosen field, of course. One is constantly surprised and delighted by felicitous touches which prevent the piece from ever descending into the commonplace. It is also well laid out for the piano, though in a different style to his earlier pieces.

**Golliwog** : see Puppets Suite

**Green Tulips (1935) \*\*\***

The second piece 'based on a theme by Austen Croom-Johnson', and also recorded with the piano-harpsichord combination. The opening section is based on a theme rather than a melody, skilfully built up with the use of a contrasting phrase. The second section is more rhythmic, with much contrasting use of three beats against two. The third part is yet another of those beautiful cantabile melodies of which he seems to have had an inexhaustible supply, repeated with a highly and satisfyingly pianistic elaboration. The piece ends with a reminiscence of the opening theme.

**Guinevere** : see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**Harmonica Dance** : see Three Dances in Syncopation

**Harp of the Winds (1939) \*\*\*\***

A stormy night when all the trees in his garden seemed to be 'moaning and sighing', according to his wife's account, sounded to Billy like harp arpeggios, and led to this extremely beautiful piece. The opening is an excellent impression of a harp, with a lovely theme closely harmonised. A piu

mosso section leads to four bars in definitely rhythmic style, after which we are treated to a brilliantly syncopated version of the harp theme. The piece ends with a pianissimo reminiscence of the sound of a harp.

**Hollyberry** : see In My Garden Suites, Autumntime

**Hollyhock** (1927) \*\*\*\*

Another of Billy's flower numbers - he was a keen gardener - the theme of the main section has the first bar triplet characteristic of so many novelties, but in every other way shows how far Billy rises above the general level, in quality of inspiration, harmonic palette and technical fluency. The final (C) section is particularly full of brio, with an exciting short coda.

**Honeysuckle** (1931) \*\*\*

The introduction to this piece, based mainly on chords rising and descending by minor thirds, is later used as the start of the second section. Both sections make considerable use of octaves and octave chords. The third section, however, is the high-spot: it's only eight bars, which are repeated to make sixteen, and then the whole section is itself marked to be repeated, but it's such a perfect combination of melody, harmony and pianistic layout that one would happily play it all over again.

**Honky Tonk** (1928) \*\*\*\*

Another masterpiece, this one lives up to its title and has a good sprinkling of 'blue' notes in accordance. Its rhythmic verve is unstoppable though brilliantly varied. The recording of a 2-piano arrangement by the Labeque sisters, though a trifle o.t.t., is completely irresistible.

**Hop-o-my-thumb** : see Two Stepping Tones

**Jack-in-the-Box** : see Piano Exaggerations

**Japonica** : see In My Garden Suites, Summertime

**Jasmine** (1929) \*\*

The introduction has a whole-tone flavour, while the first theme is mainly in octaves, often with just the fifth added, thus avoiding too lush a sound. The first interlude is an ingenious combination of rhythmic and harmonic devices, while the second requires the right hand to do some skipping about.

**Jazzaristrix** : see Pianolettes

**Jazz Master** : see Pianolettes

**Jazz Mistress** : see Pianolettes

**Jill All Alone** (1955) \*\*\*

The title refers, of course, to his wife Jill (christened Ermengilda) and to the amount of time Billy was occupied elsewhere. It has a slightly sad nostalgic feeling that seems entirely appropriate. The middle section is as attractive and tuneful as the rest, but the piece never had the success it deserved, largely on account of the title, which for some reason put off those like Reg Leopold who would otherwise have popularised it. For amateurs it has the added attraction of being one of Billy's easiest pieces.

**The Joker** : see Four Aces Suite

**Judy** : see Puppets Suite

**The Junior Apprentice** : see Three Syncopated Rambles

**Ladybird** : see Three Contrasts

**Ladybird Lullaby** : see Insect Oddities

**Lady of the Lake** : see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**A Legend** : see Pastoral Suite

**Leprechaun's Leap** (1940) \*\*\*

This piece is dedicated to Stanford Robinson, for many years conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra, and presenter of Tuesday Serenade, a very popular BBC programme of good quality light music. It's a one-off in Billy's output, there being nothing quite like it. As the title suggests, it has an Irish flavour, and much of both the melodies and the accompaniment suggests the style of a

village band. Some rest is provided from the relentless jiggling by a piu lento section, with a beautiful melody still in the same folk mood.

**Lily Pond (1929) \*\*\*\***

The opening suggests the stillness and peace of the pond, but the extremely beautiful middle section has much greater warmth, building up to a climax of considerable power before returning to the mood of the opening.

**Little Lady from Spain** : see Musical Moments

**Look Lively (1952) \*\***

This was written as the music for a radio series, and is very much in the style of the orchestral novelties of its period. Of course, it's a superior example of the genre, tuneful and attractive throughout.

**Loose Elbows** : see Piano Exaggerations

**Lovers' Lane** : see Pastoral Suite

**Maids of Honour (1957) \*\***

Marked quasi minuet, this, like the minuets written about the same time, has a neo-classical, slightly French feel. The middle section is in the same key as the main theme, B minor.

**Many Years Ago** : see Musical Moments

**Marigold (1927) \*\*\***

What is there to say about this, Billy's most famous piece, except that, good though it is, it certainly is not by any means his best. Perhaps, as quite often with Billy's novelties, the finest section is actually the last. There is a piano duet version as well, attractively laid out so that secundo also gets a chance to play melody, and with slight but welcome variations.

**May Morning** : see Musical Moments

**Meadowsweet** : see In My Garden Suites, Summertime

**Merlin the Wizard** : see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**Mignonette (1931)**

This is one of a number of pieces which Billy marks to be played slowly. However, when one listens to his recordings - easy to do now that there are at least three current reissues on CD - one would hardly describe his speed as slow. Be that as it may, this piece, which is melodic in style throughout, can sound perfectly satisfactory at a considerably slower pace than that on Billy's recording: on the other hand it doesn't lose anything by being taken at speed. As there's plenty of octave work for the right hand which not everyone will find too easy, it's perhaps just as well to have the option.

**Minuet By Candlelight (1956) \*\***

The main theme is in the minor, and has stronger harmonic interest than its companion minuet, also a late piece. The middle section, somewhat in musette style, is in the major.

**Minuet for Pamela (1945) \*\***

The Pamela in question was Billy's god-child. Like a number of Billy's later pieces, there is something of a French feel to this. It's in neo-classical style, with perhaps the mid-section being the most attractive part.

**Mistletoe (1935) \*\*\*\***

Billy dedicated this piece to the members of the Billy Mayerl Club, who by correspondence and personal tuition numbered in the tens of thousands. It sounds as if he was grateful for their interest, since Mistletoe is one of his most delightful pieces. The main section, though not so written, is really in compound metre (12/8): it's a delightfully lilting theme which, on its repeat, drops down a semitone at the beginning of bar six, to return to the original key at the beginning of bar seven - a charming little harmonic detail that only the attentive listener would notice. The interlude is of the same high quality, and on its repeat involves playing the melody notes just before the beat, with the harmonic support on the beat.

**Misty Lawn** : see In My Garden Suites, Autumntime

**Moorish Idol** : see Aquarium Suite

**Muffin Man** : see Three Miniatures in Syncopation

**My Party Frock** : see Musical Moments

**Nimble-fingered Gentleman** (1934) \*\*\*

This popular piece was dedicated to, and intended as a tribute to, Jack Wilson, whose pianism Billy much admired, and who regularly played Billy's pieces. The joke in the title is that the dedicatee disliked scale passages, though the main theme is highly scalic in nature, and at speed, but as this is in E flat and A flat, not that difficult. The first interlude is in right-hand octaves with a strong triplet feel. The second interlude is the most rhythmically varied section. A shortened version of the opening theme leads into a brief coda.

**Orange-blossom** (1936) \*\*\*

Though not as well known as some, the main theme of this is one of Billy's most beautiful melodies, and one in which the grace-notes that form an integral part of each triplet add immeasurably to the total. The two interlude sections have a more aggressive feel, and the second contains a short snatch from the Bridal March, no doubt a reference to the traditional use of orange-blossom at the wedding ceremony.

**Oriental** (1931) \*

This is something of an oddity in Billy's output, perhaps the only one of his mature works that one can see as coming from the youthful composer of the Egyptian Suite. Lacking any strong melodic or other interest, it is one mainly for those who want to know the complete oeuvre.

**Parade of the Sandwich-Board Men** (1938) \*\*\*\*

One of the most successful of the later novelties, Parade's main theme is particularly enjoyable to play, with the inspired change to thirds instead of single melody notes in the fifth and sixth bars of the main eight-bar section. Both the interludes are attractive and again very pianistically laid out.

**The Passing of Arthur** : see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**Pastoral** : see Three Contrasts

**Pastorale Exotique** (1929) \*\*

Rather unexpectedly, this piece is marked 'brioso, con fuoco' and the opening section is vigorous, at times even violent. It dies away into a beautiful cantabile theme, marked 'tranquillo', after which a shortened version of the opening section concludes the piece.

**Patrol of the Camels** : see Egyptian Suite

**Penny Whistle** (1932) \*\*\*

An introductory scale flourish leads into a quote from Pop Goes the Weasel, taking us into the world of penny-whistle users. The main theme keeps well up in the top of the piano, to suit the register of the instrument it's imitating. After its initial statement, Pop Goes the Weasel is used again, this time to form a bridge to a second statement of the main theme. The middle section, arrived at by means of a single chord, is one of those flowing melodies Billy had the secret of: its connection with the title is obscure, but it's beautiful enough to silence such thoughts.

**Postman's Knock** (1951) \*\*\*\*

One of the later novelties, this has more in common with a 'classical' piece of the same period such as Crystal Clear than with the early novelties. The exuberance has gone: in its place we find control and economy, yet there is still the same underlying dynamism. It is very short and, like so many of Billy's pieces, leaves the listener wishing there was more.

**Praying Mantis** : see Insect Oddities

**Prelude** : see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**Printer's Devil** : see Three Syncopated Rambles

**Punch** : see Puppets Suite

**Railroad Rhythm (1938) \*\*\*\***

The opening theme is said to have been jotted down by Billy on a cigarette packet, as was his wont, during a train journey. It is certainly effectively onomatopoeic. After some stressed chords in irregular rhythm, the main theme has an appropriately rushing feel to it. There are a couple of subsidiary sections, the second of which is very martellato in style. The whole effect is of relentless drive, and it is Billy's most pictorial piece. Though far from easy, it is one of those irresistible pieces every professional, and every amateur of any ability, who is interested in the style, wants to have a crack at.

**Ringmaster** : see The Big Top Suite

**Robots (1928) \*\*\***

This opens with a march-like figure which aptly suggests the mechanical relentlessness robots might be expected to evince. There is no letting-up anywhere, the whole having the nature of a brilliant moto perpetuo.

**Romanesque (1947) \*\***

The first part of the opening section is based on little more than three chromatically descending notes in arpeggio figuration: it has an improvisatory feel. The middle section is more scherzando in style.

**Scallywag (1931) \*\*\***

Though on first hearing (or playing) this is not one of Billy's most immediately attractive pieces, it does grow on you. The key to its interpretation is in its title, but it requires some fairly athletic pianism.

**Sennen Cove (1929) \*\***

This is, of course, a reduction for piano of the orchestral tone-picture and fine as such, though it isn't suitable for a solo piece. But while all we have is a transfer of an old recording which doesn't do the work anything like justice, it does at least give us an idea of its qualities.

**Shallow Waters (1936) \*\*\*\***

One of Billy's most beautiful pieces in his lyrical mode, the main section evokes a mood of calm peace. The middle section is more agitated, but the mood soon returns to the calm of the opening.

**Shy Ballerina (1948) \*\*\***

This title was suggested by a little girl who was asked to dance for Billy but was too shy. Soon after its composition it was included in a TV programme he did, with a miniature ballerina dancing on the piano. It is one of his easier pieces: even the cadenza with which it opens is so laid out as to present no real difficulty. This leads into a charming waltz with a slightly faster middle section

**Siberian Lament (1934) \***

The main theme, appropriately in the minor, is followed by its transformation into the major which works up into an impassioned climax before going back to the minor. Unexpectedly, we hear the major version again, but the last four bars are minor. The mood is appropriately melancholy.

**Six a.m. - The Milkman** : see Three Syncopated Rambles

**Sleepy Piano** : see Piano Exaggerations

**Song of the Desert** : see Egyptian Suite

**Song of the Fir-tree (1938) \*\*\***

One of Billy's best-loved pieces, perhaps partly because it is short and comparatively easy, this is particularly noteworthy in that there is extant a filmic record of Billy playing it, complete, in an otherwise totally undistinguished film of the fifties. His piano style is as one would expect, unfussy, and showing complete control. The piece itself is based on a well-known Scandinavian folk-song, slightly plaintive in style: it is first of all played straight and then in a syncopated version, both of them entirely delightful.

**Souvenir** : see Egyptian Suite

**Studies in Syncopation, Opus 55 (18 numbers) :** see below

**Sussex Downs (1957) \*\*\***

The mood of this is an unusual one for Billy, English rustic - the title English Dance could have been more appropriately given to this piece. It certainly captures the countryside feel very successfully. The piano writing is reminiscent of an arrangement from score, and it isn't difficult to imagine that the version for small orchestra was the first to be written. This doesn't alter the fact that it is melodic and enjoyable to play.

**Sweet William (1938) \*\*\*\***

One of his most popular pieces, the opening has an interesting combination of tune and descant in the right hand, with a lovely lilting feeling. In contrast, the middle section isn't syncopated at all. The transitions, as so often, are handled with such ease that one is inclined to overlook the skill deployed.

**The Sword Excalibur :** see Legends of King Arthur Suite

**A Temple in Kyoto :** see Three Japanese Pictures

**Theme from Balearic Episode (1954) \*\*\***

This is the more lyrical of the two principal themes, the main islands being named Majorca and Menorca, Billy decided to cast one theme each in major and minor keys. The complete work, a very successful mini-concerto, lasts about eight minutes, but has not so far been published. This theme, in the major, has a slight modal flavour. The 'virtuoso' sections have presumably been simplified for publication, since they are not at all difficult.

**Theme from Majestic Interlude (1959) \*\*\***

This has a particular interest in demonstrating how Billy was able to adapt to the changing musical styles he lived through. It is unmistakably in the style of the fifties, and is perhaps a little more virtuosic than its companion in the Balearics.

**Trapeze :** see the Big Top Suite

**Vienna Story (1957) \*\***

I assume this was written as incidental music for a radio serial. It certainly has a Viennese flavour, but with just enough of an individual touch. The economy of style clearly shows the hand of a master.

**A Village Festival :** see Pastoral Suite

**Virginia Creeper :** see Pianolettes

**Wedding of the Ant :** see Insect Oddities

**Weeping Willow (1932) \*\***

This piece has a certain similarity to A Lily Pond, in that both start with a cool, rather detached theme which leads to a middle section of a level of emotion and beauty that Billy rarely aimed at, though in both cases with complete success. This is recalled at the end in a beautifully judged coda.

**Whirligig :** see Aquarium Suite

**Willow Moss :** see Aquarium Suite

**White Heather (1932) \*\***

Both the first and second themes of this novelty involve a lot of octave work for the right hand at the very top of the piano, and the second theme in particular needs some pretty nimble skipping around. The second interlude is a 'swung' version of Annie Laurie, nicely done.

**Wisteria (1929) \*\***

The opening melody, in single notes, is constructed from a simple rhythmic phrase extended with considerable skill, and counterpointed by a left-hand up and down scale in sixths. It is repeated in fourths with some alterations. In the middle section the interest is more harmonic and rhythmic.

## **Studies in Syncopation** (1930-1931)

Though Billy reached a level of excellence in every field he entered, it was for his syncopated novelties that he achieved most fame and these are perhaps his most quintessential expression. It has been disputed as to whether the term novelty rag is accurate, the argument being that the style has departed too far from ragtime: be that as it may, its origins in ragtime are indisputable, in particular the more ebullient style associated with the East Coast school. Novelty rags are essentially show-off pieces expressive of physical exuberance. Many of the best in fact were never written down and if they still exist at all it is only in piano roll form.

Perhaps the most famous American novelties, Confrey's Dizzy Fingers and Kitten on the Keys, neither of them make their effect through melody. Billy's novelties, however, were not only more technically intricate but often demonstrated a melodic gift of a high order.

Fortunately for us, Billy provided his own introduction to the special techniques needed for these pieces in his three books of studies, which are not only ideal for their stated purpose but also contain a good proportion of pieces that are attractive in their own right. I would recommend anyone who is seriously interested in getting to grips with the style to acquire these three books.

**No. 1** consists of a standard tenth followed by a chord in the left hand while the right hand has to make jumps in, mainly, octave chords.

**No. 2** requires a light and fluent touch and includes accented off-beats and descant notes above the main melody.

**No. 3** is one of two studies especially for the left hand. This one is for thumbing a tenor melody, while the middle section has some easy crossing-over of hands.

**No. 4** is an example of the very common novelty practice of taking a 3-beat figure and repeating it in a 4-beat bar so that it receives various different accentuations. The trickiest part for many will be bar 4, where the L.H. is no longer providing rhythmic support on each beat, and the triplet in the R.H. has to be stretched across 2 beats.

**No. 5** uses a combination of triplets and quarter-notes to encourage rhythmic accuracy in this area.

**No. 6** takes a standard harmonic progression and splits it up into a rhythmically syncopated form. The only part which might give a spot of trouble is the crossing over of hands in the second section, but as this is one of Billy's commonest techniques, it would be well worth the effort to practise and master.

**No. 7** the main section is concerned with chromatic discords, while the second subject uses descending tonic chords in the left hand above a staccato figure. Neither poses particular technical problems.

**No. 8** is for L.H. only and calls out for a R.H. part to be added to it.

For **No. 9** Billy insists that is played very slowly, and most of us will be glad of this, as it requires concentration and the second subject needs some neat placing of successive chords.

**No. 10** the first subject combines successive fourths with irregular accenting, while the second subject introduces an acciaccatura effect on octaves.

**No. 11** starts off like a regular novelty, with bars 5 - 8 being constituted of 'break' figuration. This is a simple one, split between the hands, and the only point to watch is keeping it in strict time. The second subject, with octaves in the right hand, is harder, requiring a light and crisp style.

**No. 12** again uses the combination of triplets and quarter-beats, while the second section employs tremolo, a technique which only makes its effect if held under tight control, so it's worth practising it here.

**No. 13** employs consecutive fourths in an attractively tuneful figure, while the second subject gives easy practice in accenting different beats.

**No. 14** again deals with a sustained tenor part in L.H., with some work on cross-accenting thrown in for good measure.

**No. 15** doesn't seem to present any particular difficulty until one notices the tempo indication, Allegro

con fuoco. For this one certainly needs the precise R.H. staccato work Billy alludes to in his note. The second subject has a repeated L.H. figure above which the R.H. plays an accented figure in octaves.

**No. 16** involves a fair number of different techniques: tremolo, fourths, the reverse L.H. accompaniment in which the thumb is required to hold a note while the little finger plays a bass note –

for many of us this effect will have to be obtained by judicious pedaling – while the second subject uses breaks with varied accents which require concentration.

**No.17** is an exceptionally beautiful miniature, including quite a wide range of expression and technique within its 21 bars. The 4 bars starting at bar 11 should perhaps be played a little more lightly and crisply than the rest, while from bar 15 it will need careful pedaling.

**No.18** has some more intricate rhythmical problems, the second section having some alternating hand work, while the prescribed speed is a goal not all of us will achieve.

## PIANO SUITES and SETS

### Aquarium Suite (1937) \*\*\*\*

This is one of Billy's most attractive sets, and also exists in a version for piano and orchestra, which was incidentally the version he used when he recorded it.

**Willow Moss** has a fairly long introduction - twenty bars. It opens with a beautifully harmonised series of chords, ending with a major seventh, which last also gives its characteristic flavour to the main theme to follow. A rhythmic figure based on the one chord leads into a freely modulating passage taking us into the C major opening theme, one of Billy's most lovely inspirations. A cadenza-like passage is followed by a syncopated version of the main melody, but this time with a middle eight added.

**Moorish Idol** has a vaguely oriental atmosphere to its opening section in accordance with its title. The middle section has an arpeggio passage, easy to picture as an orchestral tutti, followed by the piano response.

**Fantail** is more like one of Billy's syncopated numbers, even to the use of fourths. The middle section again uses the statement - counterstatement form seen in No. 2.

**Whirligig** is also in the basic A-B-A shape of Nos. 2 & 3, and provides a brilliant conclusion which has the especial merit for many of us of not being as difficult as it sounds.

### The Big Top Suite (1948) \*\*\*\*

This suite is another example of the difficulty of classifying Billy's work. It has a lot more to it than would be expected if we classified it as light music and at the same time the style has taken on a certain density in terms of musical thought, though not texture.

The opening number, **Ringmaster**, is in 12/8 time, with bold aggressive harmonies and figuration.

The middle section has an interesting use of controlled glissandos.

**Clowning** opens with a very jaunty main theme: during its course it quotes three children's songs, 'Boys and Girls Come Out to Play', 'Three Blind Mice', and 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush', all skilfully integrated into the whole. **Entry of the Trick Cyclists** does indeed manage to give an impression of acrobatic agility.

**Dancing Horse** is also highly pictorial, with a galumphing base coupled to a light tripping theme.

The middle section is more aggressively rhythmic, and the leadback ingeniously uses a fragment of a hunting-call.

**Trapeze** is a brilliant perpetuum mobile: if the trapeze artists kept this pace up their act must have been stupendous. It is an excellent finale, with a superb middle section, and brings this wonderful suite to a thrilling close.

### Egyptian Suite (1919)

These are Billy's first published pieces, and not at all what one would expect. He was very keen indeed to make his name, and yet, though there is the usual imitation orientalism, there is little trace of Ketelby-style obvious melodic appeal, in spite of the fact that he says he was telling himself he had to be 'commercial'.

The opening movement, **Souvenir**, is constructed out of little more than a phrase of rising and descending fourths. In the second, **Song of the Desert**, the harmonies, as will happen quite often during his later career, are bold enough to cause one to check that the correct notes are being played.

The finale, **Patrol of the Camels**, again lacks melodic appeal, and frankly the only reason for playing the pieces is curiosity.

### **Four Aces Suite** (1933) \*\*\*\*

This is certainly Billy's best-known suite: the titles spring from his keen interest in card playing.

**Ace of Clubs** opens with eight bars of rhythmic introduction, but then the first theme is straightforward in style until the last four bars of its sixteen-bar shape, though with some off-beat accents. The second theme makes a feature of these, and requires skilful handling to ensure they get the right amount of emphasis.

**Ace of Diamonds** is the shortest of the set, with its theme getting first a straightforward tune-accompaniment treatment, and then with the accompaniment changing to chords rising and falling by semitonal steps. The middle eight is more aggressively rhythmic.

**Ace of Hearts** is the most melodic of the four. The first theme makes a feature of chords on the upbeats followed by an internal resolution on the beats. The second section has a delightful feel of lazy relaxation to it, while being one of Billy's best tunes.

**Ace of Spades**, the finale to the set, is the most extended piece, even opening with a long cadenza which sets the slightly oriental character of the number. The first theme is pentatonic in style, with internal trills in the right-hand much of the time. The second section sets a flowing but rhythmic figure against a tenor descant. Billy also made a duet version, in which the division of the cadenza, in particular, between the two players requires excellent ensemble.

### **Joker** (1934) \*\*\*

Though this was written after the main suite, it obviously belongs with it, not least because it contains quotes from the earlier numbers. The style is drier and harmonically more abrasive, but just as enjoyable, and it makes a fitting coda to the rest of the suite.

### **In My Garden Suites** \*\*\*

#### **Autumntime** (1946)

**Misty Lawn**, the first movement of this suite, is a short Andante based on a charming theme, with a triplet on the first beat which displays few signs of syncopation. There is no contrasting section. It needs to be kept moving, especially as the next movement is a slow one.

**Amber Leaves** has an accompaniment with quarter-beats set against a theme using triplets: however, as they alternate, there are no tricky rhythmic problems. The theme itself, in the minor, is particularly haunting, while in the middle section the interest is mainly harmonic.

**Hollyberry** goes a lot faster than the first two movements, but as it is largely in single notes in both hands throughout presents little real difficulty: what it does need is good rhythmic attack. It makes an exhilarating conclusion to an enchanting little suite.

#### **Springtime** (1947)

**Cherry Blossom** is a simple enough theme given added interest by descending figures in the bass and then the tenor parts. The second theme makes some use of triplet figures, but neither are in syncopated style.

**Carpet of Yellow**, the slow movement, has only the one section, and in it the main interest is in the attractive harmonies and simple but effective use of a descant dominant (B flat). The piece is not difficult but provides much scope for expressive playing.

**April Showers** is marked 'as fast as you wish', which I imagine is a relaxed way of saying 'as fast as you can'. It certainly won't come off if it's played too slowly. The first theme, mainly in arpeggio-type figuration, makes use of a short excursion in the key a semitone up (A major from A flat major), while the brief second theme is more scalic. The whole thing should fly by at speed.

#### **Summertime** (1947)

**Meadowsweet** is one of the most syncopated numbers of the twelve. Though not rhythmically difficult, it does require a close attention to detail to bring off properly, both sections containing plenty of off-beat notes. Besides being one of the longest pieces, it is also one of the most attractive and repays any attention given to it. The coda is particularly lovely.

**Japonica's** opening theme makes a feature of sevenths, while the second is more syncopated: the two together make a charming and attractive number.

**Alpine Bluebell** is another number than needs to go as fast as you can manage. The opening has some off-beat emphases, but the main section is quite straightforward. The second section is easier, mostly with single notes in the right-hand. Though enjoyable enough, the piece is perhaps not quite up to the level of its two companions.

### Wintertime (1946)

This is the easiest of the four suites, so the best one to start with for pianists of modest ability. As all the numbers are attractive, any effort spent mastering it is very rewarding.

**Christmas Rose's** first theme is simple, melodic, and attractive. The second theme is more syncopated without producing any real problems.

**The First Snowdrop** is a short and tuneful andante, mainly chordal in the right hand.

**Evergreen** is fast and scherzo-like but with a simple left hand and the right hand part in single notes, again presenting no difficulties.

### Insect Oddities (1940)

#### **Beetle in the Bottle** \*\*

One of Billy's most ingeniously rhythmic pieces, with the left hand inserting mainly foreign chords to an ingenious rhythmic pattern which well conveys the impression suggested by the title - though, according to his wife Jill, Billy was far too fond of animals not to have freed any trapped creature at once. His own recording of it is superb.

#### **Ladybird Lullaby** \*\*

The title was suggested by a ladybird that settled on Billy's music-paper while he was writing. It's a gentle piece in three-time, in which, as in the other Ladybird, the whole is built up from the opening short phrase. This one, however, has a contrasting middle section, more in waltz style. The whole piece is melodic, attractive, and not difficult.

#### **Praying Mantis** \*\*\*\*

Perhaps the finest of the set, the opening tune starts with single notes in the right hand, then on its repetition moves up a third (from E flat to G), which produces a feeling of brightness, into a right-hand octave treatment, and stays there for the middle section, which has a family resemblance but is different enough to produce adequate contrast. The final reprise of the opening section moves back to E flat.

#### **Wedding of the Ant** \*\*\*

This is marked 'lightly and brightly', and that perfectly describes the style of this catchily rhythmic number. The melody of the principal section is built up from mainly harmonic and rhythmic elements to produce an instantly memorable tune, while the middle section is mainly rhythmic, with a good deal of one of Billy's favourite effects, triplets spread over two beats.

### Legends of King Arthur Suite (1929) \*\*

On the whole this is not one of Billy's more interesting suites. The only outstanding piece is the **Prelude**, which opens with an immediately striking phrase built into a lovely and evocative scene-setter.

**Merlin** makes use of the tritone (F sharp against C) first used by Liszt in his Malediction of 1834, but better known from Stravinsky's Petrushka. Here the left-hand accompaniment consists of F sharp chords, while the melody runs underneath and between them in C. This does indeed give a feeling of mystery.

**The Sword Excalibur** opens with a passage, unique in his output, of unison single notes between the hands. Its main theme is a quite effective descending motif.

**The Lady of the Lake**, only thirty-two bars long, consists of sustained chords on the first beat of each bar over which an octave descant is played on the other beats. It is subtly poetic.

**Guinevere** seems more like a simple country maiden than the great lover of legend: there is certainly no hint of the amorousness one might have expected.

**The Passing of Arthur** is indeed mournful: it recalls the theme of the Prelude, and ends in quiet despair.

### Musical Moments : 6 Miniatures (1933) \*

<b>Beside a Rustic Bridge</b>	<b>Little Lady from Spain</b>
<b>May Morning,</b>	<b>Many Years Ago</b>
<b>My Party Frock</b>	<b>Air de Ballet</b>

Following the runaway success of his Syncopated Course, Billy produced a Standard Course designed to teach the rudiments of reading and playing music, and which could be used as a preliminary to the syncopated course. For this he wrote 8 short pieces. Later he composed a set of 6

further pieces, slightly more difficult, which were published as **Musical Moments**. While pleasant enough, they are of no particular interest and not worth making a special effort to acquire.

### **Pastoral Sketches** (1928) \*\*

These are piano versions of the orchestral suite, but the first two in particular work well as solos.

**A Legend** has one of Billy's most beautiful slow melodies.

**Lovers' Lane** is in 6/8 metre, giving the feel of a stroll. There is a short middle section, after which the main theme returns with wonderful use made of augmented sixth arpeggios.

**A Village Festival** is lively and bustling but works better in the orchestral version.

### **Pianolettes** (1925) \*\*\*\*

Billy called his first published set of novelty pieces Pianolettes. These were the first British novelties and already showed a high degree of technical mastery in the piano writing as well as early intimations of a melodic gift that would flower more fully in his next set. They are also full of the energy of youth.

**All-of-a-Twist** One of the first, if not the very first, numbers he wrote, it bears many of the hallmarks of the period - the main theme has the typical opening triplet and the 3-beat phrase repeated to produce cross-rhythms, for instance. What distinguishes it, even at this early stage in his career, is its extremely pianistic layout, technical fluency and energy. The harmonies are as yet quite straightforward, though Billy's harmonic ear developed sophistication very quickly.

**Eskimo Shivers** has a particular distinction in being the only one of his numbers that Billy recorded on a Duo-Art piano roll - his other rolls were made on inferior mechanisms which don't give the true flavour of his playing - and this is now available in an excellent reproduction on a Conifer CD and cassette. After a brilliant introduction, the opening theme perhaps has more technical than melodic interest, but the second section makes up for this, possessing both qualities in high degree, and the last keeps up the same standard.

**Jazzaristrix** This is marked 'lively', and indeed liveliness is a key feature here. The opening theme is a harmonic cliché, but the brilliant layout lifts it into another dimension altogether and makes it quite irresistible. The other two sections also show that even at this stage he already had complete mastery of the style, one might almost say his style, since, even if he didn't invent it, he enriched and perfected it to an unmatched degree.

**Jazz Master** According to Billy's own account, it was in 1915 (when he was thirteen years old) that he produced the first version of The Jazz Master and played it to two of his teachers at Trinity College of Music, when it met with a hostile reaction to the extent that he was threatened with expulsion if he ever produced such stuff again. Eight years later, he 'dressed it up in all the finery at his command', and it sold 150,000 copies in a year. The opening theme is slightly reminiscent of the C section of a Zez Confrey rag, You Tell 'Em Ivories, and it is immediately evident how immeasurably richer and fuller is Billy's piece.

**Jazz Mistress** For my money this doesn't scintillate to the same extent as her male counterpart, but that is judging by the highest standards. It is still an excellent novelty, at its finest perhaps in the last section.

**Virginia Creeper** The first of Billy's numerous pieces with flower titles, this is perhaps more brilliant than one would expect from its name. The opening theme makes a feature of triplets, which are noticeably present in the second theme as well: in contrast, the third avoids them completely. All three sections are melodic and attractive as well as being beautifully laid out.

Good though these last pieces are, Billy completely surpassed them with this next set, at least two of which are masterpieces.

### **Piano Exaggerations** (1926) \*\*\*\*\*

**Antiquary** The title refers to Billy's favourite brand of whisky, and the fact that he already had a favourite brand at 23 hardly augured well for his future health. Be that as it may, it is, unusually, in a minor key, as are very few novelties, by Billy or anyone else. Throughout, its drive and vigour are outstanding. The introduction sets the pace, almost demonic in its intensity, while the first theme is distinctly spiky. This is, unusually, separated from the second section by a reprise of the introduction, and employs a characteristic rhythm throughout most of its length. The final section is in the major, and starts off in different style with short scale passages, but very soon jerky syncopation, as in the first section, comes back. The introduction returns one last time to form the coda of this superb work.

**Jack-in-the-Box** The charms of this piece are not quite so immediately obvious as with *Antiquary* and *Sleepy Piano*, but it doesn't lag far behind them, if at all, in musical and pianistic quality. In keeping with its title, it maintains a light springy quality throughout. The first theme is in two sections, the first near the top of the keyboard and full of triplet figures, while the second transforms a simple upward chromatic scale into a brilliant piece of piano writing, displaying irresistible momentum, by the use of subsidiary notes and offbeat accents. The second section is also strongly rhythmic, while the finale, lightly textured throughout, has a beautiful sustained melody in the left hand above scintillating right-hand figuration.

**Loose Elbows** In both figuration and harmonies this piece looks back to the earlier set, the *Pianolettes*. Good though it is, it is pretty thoroughly eclipsed by its three companions, which all betray a greater melodic richness, a more interesting harmonic palette, and an increased boldness of invention.

**Sleepy Piano** This is a strong contender for the honour of being Billy's most beautiful piece. The first section most obviously fits the title, the second has a bluesy feel to it, while the third, in G flat, the most beautiful of all, is also the most difficult. All of them should be kept to the mood suggested by the title, when their full romantic charm is best brought out.

### **Puppets Suite** (1927) \*\*\*\*

This is one of Billy's finest early sets. The two outer movements are aggressively rhythmic, with **Judy** providing relaxation.

**Golliwog** One of the interesting things in **Golliwog** is the integration of what are basically 'break' figures into the structure: they are used to form part of the first theme, while the second, more lyrical theme is interrupted by them to lead back to the first theme. Then there are another dozen bars of purely rhythmic figuration before the final section, which combines rhythm and melody powerfully to an impressive end.

**Judy** is a blues. The opening theme has a relaxed feel to it, almost languid after the dynamism of *Golliwog*, and makes much use of fourths. The second section is built mainly from repeated notes, with occasional minor thirds to remind us it's a blues. These two elements are combined to produce a charming piece, much easier than its companions.

**Punch** is a masterpiece of brio. It is one of Billy's pieces that will not come off unless it is given somewhere near the right speed and attack. There is something of the demonic about it, highly appropriate considering the traditional character of Mr. Punch. The rhythmic impetus is relentless throughout, while the form is the standard A - B - A - C pattern used in most of Billy's novelties. The C section is Billy at his most inspired: it leaves one breathless and, as so often with this composer, wanting more.

### **Three Contrasts** (1929) \*\*\*

**Ladybird.** This piece is almost entirely built up from the little two-bar motif of the very beginning, with considerable skill and to charming effect.

**Pastoral** is similar to the opening of the *Pastoral suite*, a broad slow melody of considerable beauty in a mood of quiet repose.

**Fiddle Dance.** This starts off with an imitation of open fifths on the fiddle, creating a suitably rustic atmosphere. The fleet-footed first theme is harmonised quite sparsely, in keeping with its fiddle affiliation. However, the middle section, which has a change of tempo to three beats instead of the earlier two, is more march-like, and has a much more astringent harmonic style. It builds up into a big, quite harsh climax before sinking back into a short reprise of the opening.

### **Three Dances in Syncopation** (1930) \*\*\*

This suite consists of three well-contrasted pieces.

The first, **English Dance**, is gently lyrical, while the middle section, in similar mood, nonetheless manages to keep the right hand darting up and down the keyboard. It ends with a Gershwin-esque phrase.

The interest in the first section of **Cricket Dance** is mainly rhythmic, while the middle part in contrast is more a mixture of melody and harmony. **Harmonica Dance**, though, is the gem of the set. Its main theme, in Yale Blues style, has a languorous feel to it, and really does sound as if it was meant to be played on the Harmonica. The middle section consists of an eight-bar theme which is repeated three more times with only the slightest of changes, and the theme itself, reduced to bare bones, is little

more than a cliché: nonetheless, the organisation of the material is so brilliant that the four repetitions do not satiate.

### **Three Japanese Pictures** (1930) \*\*

**Almond Blossom:** one of Billy's broad melodies, but the harmonies are more dissonant than usual, giving an appropriately oriental flavour. There is nothing here of the fake chinoiserie of such pieces as *In a Chinese Temple Garden*, the style is at once much bolder and more subtle. The middle section is built on a minor version of the same melody, while the ending, with the left hand playing seconds against a trill-like figure in the right, is particularly effective.

**A Temple in Kyoto** is very short, really just an interlude, and makes no attempt to be anything other than atmospheric.

**Cherry Dance** opens with a bitonal section: in other words left and right hands are playing in different keys. As they are also playing in the same register, this involves some crossing of hands as well. The main theme is made up of broken arpeggio figures. There is a beautiful dolce section in the middle which actually sounds more Russian than Japanese to me, but I wouldn't be without it.

### **Three Miniatures in Syncopation** (1928) \*\*\*

**Cobweb** is not like anything else in Billy's output. I must confess that when I heard Billy's recording of it, some time after I had been playing it for myself, it wasn't at all as I had imagined, which was that the piece had an impressionist slant to it, but obviously I'd got it wrong. The interest is mainly harmonic, and it certainly creates its own mood.

**Muffin Man** is marked as Yale Blues tempo, so isn't meant to go too fast. It incorporates the old street muffin-sellers' call.

**Clockwork** is another completely wonderful piece. It seems to me to have affinities with (a modernised version of) the style of Weber, the finale of whose first sonata is a *Moto Perpetuo*. This isn't so marked, but certainly is. It falls into two halves: in the first, the opening theme is figurational and rhythmic rather than melodic, and the second theme keeps up this impetus. The first theme is repeated, then the second half begins: this also maintains the forward momentum. It in turn has its own middle section followed by a reprise of its first theme. The form is an unusual one for Billy: offhand I can't think of another use of it. However, the piece is extremely successful: all its component parts are of high quality, and the whole keeps up this irresistible momentum, once again leaving one wishing there was more of it.

### **Three Syncopated Rambles** (1933) \*\*\*

In **Junior Apprentice** the opening section is light and bouncy, while the middle involves octave scales with some leaps - sure aim needed!

**Printer's Devil** is sub-titled *Theme and Transcription*, but it would more accurately have been called *Theme, Interlude and Transcription*. The theme itself is a beautiful one, while the interlude strikes a more plaintive note: it leads into a mini-cadenza, which in turns leads to a syncopated version of the theme. The whole is one of Billy's most attractive and popular pieces.

**Six a.m. - The Milkman** is a bustling scherzo with a dry, fairly sparse texture.

### **Two Stepping Tones : Syncopations in Moderation** (1934)

#### **1. Fascinating Ditty \***

This is one of the strangest of Billy's titles, for the reason that the piece itself ranks quite low in the fascination stakes as far as Billy's compositions are concerned, by far the larger percentage of them being more fascinating than this one. This is not to say that it doesn't have its attractions, only that they are lesser.

#### **2. Hop-o-my-thumb \*\*\***

Like its companion, of moderate difficulty only. The opening theme is based on a simple rhythmic figure, skilfully varied. The second section, chordal in style, contains some quite bold harmonies which will make most pianists look twice at the notes to make sure they're playing the right ones. The third theme is made up of runs and arpeggios, so that the whole presents a little compendium of technique.

## PIANO TRANSCRIPTIONS

Regrettably, there doesn't seem to be much point in going into Billy's transcriptions in any great detail. There are over a hundred and twenty of them but only one, to my knowledge, is in print at the moment (**Body and Soul**).

Every issue of the Billy Mayerl Club Magazine, which flourished from January 1934 to the beginning of war in September 1939, contained one of his transcriptions, a total of 68. They are a unique record of the more popular songs of the period, though necessarily selective for reasons of copyright - only one song each by Rodgers, Porter and Berlin, two by Kern, and, surprisingly in view of Billy's personal contact, none by Gershwin. On the other hand there are quite a few by such famous English songwriters as Harry Revel and the teams of Robin/ Rainger and Sigler/ Goodheart/Hoffman, and of course a number of Billy's own songs.

By far and away the most common form for these is Introduction, Chorus, sometimes the Verse (though this was quite often omitted altogether) and then a syncopated version of the Chorus in faster style. There is hardly one of them that doesn't become a genuine piano solo, rather than just a song arranged for piano, in Billy's hands, and while their interest nowadays is to some extent dependent on the strength of the original number, there are less than half-a-dozen that I don't return to regularly. A few are outstanding, whilst it is a matter of regret that his recorded versions of, for instance, **'Ten Cents a Dance'** and **'You Can't Stop Me Loving You'** were never published.

In the alphabetical list that follows, I have awarded stars, and only those few with none aren't worth bothering about. Otherwise, if you are fortunate enough to come across virtually any of them second-hand or otherwise, you can hardly go wrong - assuming you like the general style.

The earliest transcriptions are among the most difficult. For one thing, unlike most of the later ones, they just don't come off unless they are played somewhere up to speed, and up to speed is uncomfortably fast. Also, Billy had not yet achieved sufficient mastery of piano writing to be able to combine complete musical effectiveness with a tolerable level of technical demands.

By 1930, however, when *Body and Soul* and *Sing You Sinners* were published, he had already developed his mature style, and though this became to some extent a formula, it was such a successful and satisfying one that it lasted him throughout his career.

When a show title is given rather than the composer's name, the show is always one of Billy's own.

## PIANO TRANSCRIPTIONS

**Alabamy Bound** (de Sylva, Brown & Henderson) \*\*

Early, so difficult, but great fun if you can muster the fingers or the courage - preferably both !

**All the Things You Are** (Kern) \*\*\* Opens with a not difficult cadenza. Justifiably a favourite.

**Amoresque** (Sid Phillips) \*\* This number seems to have been pretty popular in its day, but I confess to not finding it specially interesting, even though BM recorded a piano duet version of it.

**Anything Goes** (Cole Porter) \*\* According to comments in the BMS magazine, this was one of the most popular transcriptions with the membership, being perceived as just about the right level of difficulty. This says a lot about the general standard of his students.

**April in Paris** (Vernon Duke, 1934) \*\*\* A restrained and poetic version.

**Arlene** (Williams/Waller, 1934) \*\* A charming waltz, tastefully handled.

**At the Balalaika** (George Posford, 1937) \*\* The hit number from the musical comedy 'Balalaika' is treated quite elaborately.

**Balloons** (Magine/Shawn, 1934) \*\*\* A tour de force in which Billy brilliantly transforms a ballad into a rumba. One of the most fascinating things about his version is that the rumba pattern is not actually used at all in quite a number of the bars but is nevertheless felt as being omnipresent.

**Bells of St. Mary's** (Addams, 193.8) \*\*\* A charming and inventive version of this old favourite. Great fun to play.

**Blame it on my Last Affair** (Nemo/Mills, 1939) \*\* Somewhat similar in style to 'I'm always in the mood for you', though not quite as good.

**Blue Danube** (J. Strauss II, 1935) \* Billy's arrangement is tasteful rather than specially interesting

**Blue Velvet** (Jos. Carpay, 1952) \* Originally a violin solo, the two sections of this are very different in style.

**Body and Soul** (J. Green, 1930) \*\*\* The structure of this transcription is unusual: after the opening Verse there is a quite extended treatment of the Chorus, followed by a variant of the Verse which then leads to a largely unchanged reprise of the Chorus.

**Bye Bye Pretty Baby** (Gardiner/Hamilton, 1927) \* Still mainly in Billy's earlier style.

**Chasing Shadows** (A. Silver, 1935) \*\*\* Though not, as far as I am aware, a particularly well-known tune, in this version it comes over as a real winner.

**Cheek to Cheek** (I. Berlin, 1935) \*\*\* Billy pulls out the stops again to do justice to this famous number.

**Cheer up** (Furber/Gay, 1936) \*\* The style of the second Chorus is slightly reminiscent of Bats in the Belfry.

**Christmas Medley** (trad, 1938) \*\* This is a shortened version of Billy's recording entitled 'Say It With Carols'. The highlight is his beautiful arrangement of 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.'

**Close Your Eyes** (B. Petkere, 1934) \*\*\* A lovely number expertly handled, especially the second half, in a style Billy uses nowhere else.

**Continental, The** (Con Conrad, 1935) \*\*\* An excellent treatment which at the same time is not terribly difficult.

**Da Capo** (G. Boulanger, 1950) An arrangement rather than a transcription, and an obvious potboiler.

**The Dance Goes On** (Over She Goes, 1936) \*\*\* The main waltz-melody is slow and even marked 'con amour' (sic), a most un-Mayerl-like sentiment, but the Verse is a shimmering allegro.

**Darling, Not Without You** (Silver/Sherman/Helman, 1936) \*\* The second Chorus is a felicitous transformation with a fair amount of rhythmic variety.

**Deep Henderson** (Fred Rose, 1937) \*\* A jazz-style number given a suitably bouncy treatment.

**Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?** (Revel, 1933) \*\* After the opening Chorus there follows an extended and quite elaborate treatment of the Verse as a Blues, after which a transitional six bars are needed to lead us to the expected jaunty second Chorus.

**Elfinette** (Guus Jansen, 1950) Charming.

**Ev'ry Hour of the Day** (B. M., 1930) \*\*\* This was used in the earlier Billy's Syncopated Course as an illustration of the art of transcription. The student was sent a copy of Billy's song version, and asked to make his own piano transcription. Later, he received this, Billy's version. It is on the Flapper recording, under the title 'Extract from Personal Course in Modern Syncopation.'

**Ev'rything's Been Done Before** (Adamson/Knopf/King, 1935/1936) \*\* An attractive number in which the second Chorus twice interpolates two bars at double speed.

**Everything's in Rhythm With My Heart** (S/ G/ H 1937) \*\*\* Billy's second use of rumba rhythm which, coupled with a strong number, adds up to a total delight.

**Fatal Fascination** (Thompson & Gensler, 1936) The opening chorus in the minor has some attractive harmonies, but the main chorus in the major is less interesting.

**Fools Rush In** (Rube Bloom, 1940) \*\* This has a fairly extended Introduction, while the second Chorus makes considerable use of the tenor register, which particularly suits this tune.

**Forget-me-not** (Henry Richards, 1952) An arrangement only, of a pretty uninteresting number.

**For Only You** (Murray, Noble, 1938) \*\* This number was the theme song of the film 'Let's Make A Night Of It.' It's a typically attractive Ray Noble number, very well handled.

**Girl With the Dreamy Eyes** (Carr/Pola, '935) \* In much of the second Chorus the melody is actually played by the left hand instead of the usual crossing over of hands.

**Have You Forgotten** (Dana Suesse, 1932) \* Plenty of elaboration for a not very melodic number. One of the small number of his transcriptions that Billy recorded, and he certainly makes the most of it.

**Haymakers' Holiday** (Colin Smith, 1951) \*\* The gem here is the middle section, full of an infectious joie-de-vivre.

**Head Over Heels Medley** (Gordon & Revel, 1937) \*\*\* Besides being full of good tunes - especially 'May I Have the Last Romance With You' - this is of particular fascination in that it is the only one of his Show Medleys to be published, printed exactly as he plays it on his recording, which makes it of unique interest.

**Highland Swing** (Johnston/Grant, 1938, 1939) \*\* High spirits are in evidence here, as are some of the blue notes that Billy also used in Phil The Fluter's Ball.

**Honeymoon for Three, Medley** (B. M., 1935) \*\* This in fact contains all the three tunes that Billy wrote for the film.

**I Breathe on Windows** (Over She Goes, 1936) \*\*\* The hit number from this show, and ostensibly of a romantic nature, Billy gives it a very lively treatment which doesn't give sentimentality or even sentiment a look-in.

**I Cover the Waterfront** (J. Green, 1933) \*\*\* Though one might be inclined to wish for less of the rather boring verse, the second Chorus in particular is brilliantly done.

**I Feel Like a Feather** (Gordon/Revel, 1935) \*\*\* An attractive number with a greater than usual variety of treatments.

**If You Knew Susie** (De Sylva, Brown & Henderson, 1926) \*\* One of the first published batch, and difficult, though good.

**I Got Love** (Williams/Waller, 1939) \*\* Another number in which Billy uses an obsessive rhythmic pattern, this time an alternation between triplets and dotted notes.

**I Have Eyes** (Pola/Brandt, 1939) \*\* A slow sentimental number with a particularly lovely tenor solo in the second chorus.

**I Love Cinderella** (Cinderella, 1937) \*\* Actually a chorus number for a pantomime, but that doesn't prevent Billy from giving it the treatment, quite elaborate in the second Chorus.

**I Love My Baby** (Harry Warren, 1926) \*\* Like the other very early transcriptions, requires plenty of speed and stamina.

**Imaginary Foxtrot** (B. M., 1935) \*\* Another number Billy published in both song and transcription versions as an aid to his students.

**I'm Always in the Mood for You** (Davis/Coots, 1938) \*\*\* A particular favourite of mine, I believe the three stars are justified by the infectiously catchy feel of the whole number.

**I'm at Your Service** (Twenty to One, 1935) \*\* The hit number from this show is given a rhythmic treatment.

**I'm in a Dancing Mood** (Sigler, Goodhart, Hoffmann, 1937) \*\*\* A good strong tune given a longer and more elaborate treatment than usual.

**I'm Gonna Lock My Heart** (Eaton/Shand, 1939) \*\* An attractive fast swing number.

**I Need You** (Botterell, 1937) \*\* A ballad that seems to have been pretty popular in its day.

**Is It True What They Say About Dixie** (Caesar/Lerner/Marks, 1936) \*\*\* An excellent version of this old favourite.

**It's a Long Long Way to Your Heart** (Robin/Rainger, 1938) Way below this team's usual standard, the tune never seems to get really going.

**I Would like to Know Why** (Sissle & Blake, 1926) \*\* Another of the earliest transcriptions, and just as difficult as the rest.

**Japanese Juggler** (Alf Lancaster, 1954) \*\* Alf Lancaster was in charge of the Manchester Branch of the Billy Mayer] School. The number is quite entertaining.

**June in January** (Robin, Rainger, 1934) \*\*\* Similar in style to the same team's Love in Bloom, and just as attractively done.

**Just Like a Cat With a Mouse** (Runaway Love) \*\*\* Another of Billy's most beautiful melodies, he apparently had a really difficult job reducing this arrangement down from the one for five keyboards used in the show.

**Lambeth Walk** (Furber/Gay, 1937, 1938) \*\* Simple, straightforward, and great fun.

**Learn to Syncopate** (W. Headley, 1935) \*\* This was the winning setting of some verses by Frank Eyton, Billy's regular versifier, in another BMC magazine competition. The winner, Wilf Headley, became known as one of Billy's most talented students, and Billy was sufficiently impressed with his setting to use it as the basis of this transcription. The composer's own transcription was published in a later issue of the magazine.

**Limehouse Blues** (Braham, 1936) \*\*\*  
A masterly arrangement, but not for the faint-hearted. This is perhaps the nearest Billy ever gets to jazz.

**Love in Bloom** (Robin, Rainger, 1934) \*\*\* A lovely tune in a warm and rewarding arrangement.

**Love Locked Out** (Ray Noble, 1933) \*\* This opens with a quite elaborate Blues-style treatment, which leads into an Allegro moderato.

**Love me Forever** (Victor Schertzinger, 1935) \*\* This waltz, which has a continental flavour, is given a largely rhapsodic treatment..

**Love Thy Neighbour** (Gordon/Revel, 1934) \*\*\* A good strong tune and transcription.

**Love was Born** (Crazy Days, 1937) \*\*\* Though this starts slowly, it is marked 'in strict time' to avoid any over-indulgent romanticising. It's a beautiful number.

**Masquerading in the Name of Love** (Sigler, Goodhart, Hoffmann, 1934) \*\* The verse is turned into a waltz, with a hint of Chopin, to, as Billy says in his notes, 'avoid our old enemy Mr. Monotony'.

**Match Parade** (Karl Wehle, 1931) \*\* Charming version of this novelty.

**Me and My Girl** (Furber/Gay, 1938) \*\* Another excellent number from 'The Lambeth Walk'. The second Chorus requires a good sense of time.

**The Mood That I'm In** (Silver, Sherman, 1937) \*\* The second Chorus has perhaps a few more scales and arpeggios than usual, but they're not difficult.

**The Musical Earwig** (Eileen Kinsley, 1951) \*\* An enjoyable novelty.

**My First Thrill** (Sigler, Goodhart, Hoffmann, 1937) \*\* A simple slow-moving melody which gives Billy the opportunity to insert some attractive embellishments.

**My Heaven in the Pines** (Conrad/Campbell/Sigler, 1938) \*\* A straightforwardly attractive number, it seems difficult to associate it with the composer of The Continental.

**The Object of My Affection** (Tomlin/Poe/Grier, 1935) \*\* The whole of this number is dominated by an obsessive triplet rhythm, and in fact Billy even recommends in his notes that his students should treat it as a study. However, it is also a very attractive transcription.

**Oceans of Time** (J. Green, 1934) \* Another number whose fast chorus is in 2-beat tempo, though it reverts to a slower 4-beats for the last few bars.

**On the Other Side of Lover's Lane** (Carroll Gibbons, 1933) \* Not one of Carroll Gibbon's best numbers for my money.

**Other People's Babies** (Herbert/Ellis, 1935) \*\*\* This, however, is definitely one of Vivian Ellis' finest. With immortal words by A.P. Herbert, (not printed here, of course) it gets the full treatment, including a quasi-symphonic Introduction that has you wondering if Billy's gone classical.

**Pattycake, Pattycake, Baker Man** (Waller, 1939) \*\* A fairly lively typical Fats Waller number.

**Peg o' my Heart** (Fisher/Bryan, 1948) \*\* A thankfully unsentimental version of this famous song.

**A Penny in my Pocket** (Robin/Rainger, 1937) \*\* Another excellent number by this team, with some particularly attractive figuration in the first Chorus.

**Phil the Fluter's Ball** (French, 1938) \*\*\* Brilliant and popular, with many ingenious touches. Billy's recording of it includes a sung chorus by Billy Scott-Coomber.

**Piccolo Pete** (Phil Baxter, 1930) \* Unusual in that the second Chorus is not much changed from the first.

**Please Believe Me** (Al Jacobs, 1936) \*\* In this the L.H. has more quasi-melodic figuration than usual.

**Please Handle With Care** (Ballard, 1933) \*\* One of the small number of his transcriptions that Billy recorded, and worthy of the honour.

**The Pompous Gremlin** (Guy Desslyn, 1951) \* A pleasant enough number somewhat spoilt by being too repetitive - the composer's fault, not Billy's.

**Poor Little Rich Girl** (Coward, 1956) \*\*\* Written many years after the song first appeared, this is definitely in Billy's later style, and has a refinement and sophistication one doesn't find in earlier days.

**Rolling in the Hay** (Posford, 1934) \*\* The only occasion on which Billy failed to complete the magazine deadline, this number has only one Chorus treatment instead of the standard two.

**Say It** (Adlam/Schwartz, 1934) \* Billy writes in his notes to this transcription '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 that of jazz arrangers, since 'ruining the melody' is usually the last thing they worry about.

**Sing you Sinners** (Coslow/Harding, 1930) \*\* Billy recorded this number with Van Phillips on clarinet, and some of the recording is the same as this transcription. With the right attack, a real winner.

**Sittin' on the Edge of my Chair** (Parks, Tomlin, Poe, 1937) \*\*\* Billy's notes on this read 'To start the season off with as little abuse as possible, I have prepared for you a very easy transcription - and I mean very easy.' I'm sure by now I needn't labour the point about how it would be regarded in the nineties.

**Smoke Gets in Your Eyes** (Kern, 1934) \*\*\* A beautiful and subtle arrangement. In the second Chorus there is an extended section at double speed.

**So Rare** (Sharpe, Herst, 1937) \*\* Attractive and not difficult.

**Stranger in a Cup of Tea** (Crazy Days, 1937) \*\*\* A strange title indeed, but a beautiful number in one of Billy's best arrangements.

**Sweet** (Tomlin, Heath, LeRoux, 1937) \*\* The second Chorus has some easy but effective arpeggio figuration in the right hand.

**Sweet and Lovely** (Arnheim/Tobias/Lemare, 1931) \*\* This is treated in a fairly rhapsodic manner for Billy, and judging by the style is of earlier date than its publication (1931)

**Tell me I'm Forgiveness** (Robert Katscher, 1953) \*\*\* Excellent version of a beautiful number. Recorded by Billy

**Thanks** (Johnston & Coslow, 1933) \*\* Perhaps not one of their best numbers, but Billy does a lot with it.

**Thanks for the memory** (Robin/Rainger, 1938) \*\*\* One of the transcriptions in which Billy allows himself some small liberties with the melody in the second part.

**There's a Small Hotel** (Rodgers, 1937) \* \* \* An attractive version of this old standard. The opening Chorus adopts a very unusual, for Billy, L.H. figuration.

**There's a Star in the Sky** (Cheer Up, 1936) \*\*\* One of Billy's loveliest melodies, with some quite tricky L.H. work in the second chorus.

**Tormented** (Will Hudson, 1936) \* A Blues which will perhaps appeal more to those who particularly like the sort of mood indicated by the title.

**Transatlantic Lullaby** (G. Wright, 1951) \*\* The syncopation in the second Chorus is unusually light.

**Turkey in the Straw** (trad, 1938) \*\* The old folk-tune is given a varied and inventive workout.

**Turn on the Taps** (Over She Goes, 1936) \*\*\* An unusually elaborate treatment for this dance number, it consists of a Verse-introduction and then two quite different treatments of the main Chorus.

**Two Cigarettes in the Dark** (Webster, Pollack, 1934) \*\* The opening Chorus makes much use of a single-notes-in-the-tenor-register phrase followed by one of fourths in the treble.

**Two Hearts on a Tree** (Peter Yorke, 1934) \*\* In the second chorus a sort of foreshortening of the melody means that a leftover half-bar has to be filled in with left-hand rhythm beats.

**Two Lovely People** (Roy/Black/Currie, 1938) \*\*  
Like a lot of Billy's piano writing, a good deal easier than it might appear. With Billy it never pays to be faint-hearted.

**We Belong Together** (J. Kern, 1934) \*\* An interesting point of technique here is that the piece starts in F, modulates to A flat for the second chorus, and then achieves added brightness by jumping to D flat for the last ten bars.

**Weep no More my Baby** (J. Green, 1934) \*\* The transitions between the first Chorus to the Verse, in a different tempo, and then to the second Chorus in yet another tempo, are amongst Billy's most elaborately worked out.

**Will I Ever Know?** (Gordon & Revel, 1936) \*\* Billy doesn't use the Verse; instead he substitutes what is basically a sophisticated 4-bar vamp to lead into the second Chorus.

**With my Eyes Wide Open** (Revel, 1934) \* Though the first chorus is in standard 4-beat tempo, the second changes to 2-beat bars.

**Without a Word of Warning** (Gordon/Revel, 1936) \*\* This number was used as the basis for a competition in the pages of the BMC magazine, so that there are two published versions, one entirely Billy and one in which the bars left blank (approximately half) are filled in by the winner. It's attractively done in both versions.

**Without Rhythm** (Sigler, Goodhart, Hoffman, 1937) \*\* Billy makes a joke from the title, heading his transcription 'with very much rhythm', and asking the player to keep up a feeling of rhythmic monotony throughout.

**You Hit the Spot** (Gordon/Revel, 1936) \*\* A number which starts off as a slow ballad and then is nicely transformed into a fast and light allegro which definitely enhances the appeal.

**You're Not Too Bad Yourself** (Crazy Days, 1937) \*\* Billy says of this number that he doesn't mind whether it's played fast or more slowly, but that the pace once set must be adhered to for the whole length. In keeping with this, the second Chorus is basically a more bouncy version of the first.

**You're the Reason Why** (Sporting Love, 1934) \*\* Instead of the usual two-chorus transcription, Billy published this (in the BMC magazine) as two separate choruses, one a 'simple version' and one advanced. The simple version would assuredly not be so described today, containing as it does L.H. tenths, octave-chords in the R.H., crossing over of hands and even skip figuration, convincing evidence of how much standards have slipped. In his recorded Medley from the show, he plays the two versions one after the other.

For the sake of completeness, there are also two piano duet versions of solos, **Marigold** and **Ace of Spades**, referred to under their solo notes, and three arrangements for two pianos. One of these is an a version of three chorus numbers from 'Over She Goes', one of a number by Noel Gay, Hi-de-hi, both of these last published in the BMC mac\_wine, and the other of Harry Engleman's novelty number, Snakes and Ladders (1934), quite elaborately done.

Billy wrote two numbers for violin and piano, **Blue Shadows**, also available in a piano transcription, and **Caprinella**, composed for Reg Leopold, a charming Palm Court-style number of which we badly need a modern recording. There is also an arrangement of **Marigold** for the same combination.

## ORCHESTRAL WORKS

Billy wrote very few works directly for orchestra. He and others did orchestrate a fair number of his works originally written for the piano, mostly for small orchestra with piano-conductor. The problem of evaluating them is made much more difficult by the unavailability of most of them.

The two most important original works, the tone-poem **Sennen Cove**, and the **Pastoral Sketches**, were both recorded in the thirties, but the recorded orchestral sound of the period is very unsatisfactory, and is quite unable to convey the flavour of these pieces. Fortunately the recent Marco Polo recording of some of his orchestral music does include the **Pastoral Sketches**. The first movement of this, **Legend**, a beautiful slow piece, benefits from the added richness of the orchestral version, while the third, **A Village Festival**, is much more effective in this guise. Only the middle movement, **Lovers' Lane**, is so superbly arranged for piano that it is hard to have a preference.

It is unfortunate that the producers of the recording referred to did not see fit to include **Sennen Cove**. When all that is available is a recording with barely tolerable sound, it is hard to discern its true quality, but eventually its success as a piece of tone-painting wins through.

The only other orchestral originals on this recording are **Waltz For A Lonely Heart**, which is a beautiful quite richly scored late work in the mood one would expect from the title, and one of the orchestral novelties of the fifties, **Busybody**. This last is unfortunately in a highly unsatisfactory performance which cannot compare with the original one by the Lansdowne Light Orchestra. Like his other pieces in the same genre, it is highly competent and professional music in the style of the period

Two pieces which desperately need revival are the poem for piano and orchestra, **Forgotten Forest**, of which BM had a very high opinion and which is in his most serious vein, and **Balearic Episode**, a mini-concerto lasting about eight minutes. Part of the problem with both of these seems to be that they were never published, and the whereabouts of the orchestral parts is not known. It is devoutly to be hoped that they will turn up so that they can both take their rightful place in the repertory.

Perhaps the last work he wrote for small orchestra - actually nine instruments and the ubiquitous piano-conductor - was the Suite, **Moods in Contrast**, which he also recorded with an ensemble for Bosworth's 'Mood Music' series. These four pieces are a good deal more than background music and again deserve to be better known.

It is rumoured that Billy made a large number of orchestral arrangements, and certainly part of his job at the B.B.C. was along these lines, but unfortunately at the moment the whereabouts of these, with very few exceptions, are not known.

## VOCAL WORKS

Billy wrote a considerable number of individual songs which, though often very successful when they appeared, are unlikely to be revived, and therefore do not merit individual notice. He was producing 'hits' as early as 1923, with **Southern Rose**, a number which hasn't lost its attractiveness, and which was played live and on disc by bands of the day. Among those recorded with Billy on the piano is **'I've Got A Sweetie On The Radio'**, which besides being an attractive number also shows off his style and skill as an accompanist.

One number that does merit special attention is the beautiful ballad **'Resting'**, which was recorded in an orchestral arrangement (and most exquisitely sung) by no less than Richard Tauber. By far the greater number of his songs, though, were written for the theatre: to start with, as so many budding theatre writers, in the form of individual songs for interpolation in other people's shows, and eventually his own complete scores.

The first important one of these last was **'Nippy'**, and undoubtedly the young composer pulled out the stops for this assignment. He wrote twelve songs as well as opening and closing music, and the level was very high. Fortunately Columbia issued a fairly complete selection for orchestra and

singers on two twelve-inch sides, so that we can get a good idea of the score. Certainly **'Two Of Everything', 'It Must Be You', and 'Your Sunny Disposition And Mine'** are 'hit' quality. The comedy number **'A Couple Of Fine Old Schools'** was also recorded separately, and is still very entertaining. Besides Billy's own excellent piano selection, the brilliant pianist Patricia Rossborough made Nippy the subject of one of her best recorded medleys.

However, **'Over She Goes'** was Billy's most successful show all-round. Ganzl describes it, in his authoritative history of 'British Musical Theatre', as 'deserving to rate among the best of the inter-wars musicals'. It's the only one of Billy's shows that was made into a film: unfortunately, the film version gives a very poor impression of the show. For a start, only four of Billy's numbers are used, all heavily cut - they even got Jimmy Kennedy in to write a substitute closing number, which is certainly at best no improvement on Billy's own.

The dances and comedy business which were a vital part of the show's success are omitted or reduced to insignificance, and if one were to judge the show entirely on the basis of the film its success would be fairly incredible. However, when we learn something about the sloppy and casual way in which these films were churned out, it becomes easier to understand why it's so bad. Stanley Lupino, the star of the show, scored a hit with the comedy number **'Yes, No'**, which he recorded. The other main numbers of the show were also made available in this way, sometimes in more than the one version. Then, besides his transcriptions of **'I Breathe On Windows', 'The Dance Goes On', and 'Turn On The Taps'** - this latter an excellent dance number - Billy also published, in the BMC magazine, a two-piano arrangement of three chorus numbers from the show.

Billy's next musical, **'Crazy Days'** only had a short run, and doesn't seem to have quite gelled as a show. Probably much of this was due to the illness and premature death of Laddie Cliff, producer and co-star, during rehearsals. Nevertheless, Billy's score is of high quality, as can be heard from contemporary recordings, while he made excellent transcriptions of all three of the 'hit' numbers, **'Love Was Born', 'Stranger in a Cup of Tea', and 'You're Not Too Bad Yourself'**.

Some of the other shows were very successful, such as **'Sporting Love'** and **'Twenty To One'**, but the music was less important in these, and didn't reach the same level. Billy also wrote a number of songs for films, including one for Hitchcock's **'Blackmail'**: perhaps the most beautiful of these is **'There's A Star In The Sky'**, from the film **'Cheer Up'**, of which he also made a transcription.

Until recently we had to rely on the piano transcriptions to give us an idea of Billy's songs, but fortunately for all his fans, Shellwood has stepped into the breach and given us two CDs, each containing 24 of them, performed by a pair of singers with the indefatigable Alex Hassan at the piano. These reveal them to have worn much better than might have been expected and, for those of us who still cherish good tunes and a sense of style, are a reminder of days when such qualities were a good deal more abundant than at the present time.

It seems unlikely that any of Billy's shows will be revived. For a start, none of them were published in full score, so presumably even at the time of production it wasn't expected that amateurs would want to put them on, and nowadays, unless one or more of the scores turns up, it would be near to impossible. This is a great pity, because I have no doubt that if Billy's theatre songs had been attached to shows which were in themselves worth reviving, they would be found to stand up well.

It is certainly Billy's music for piano which will grant him immortality: the songs are not quite on the level of the great American composers, Kern, Gershwin, Rodgers, Porter, though certainly up there with the best of the British composers of the period.. He was unfortunate in not being able to work with lyricists of the quality of Lorenz Hart or Ira Gershwin, but perhaps also the emotional restraint which is an important part of the lasting appeal of his other works is less suited to songs.

Certainly there is never a hint of sentimentality, hardly ever even sentiment. Romantic numbers such as **'I Breathe On Windows', 'Love Was Born', 'There's A Star In The Sky'** affect the listener simply by virtue of being beautiful melodies, not because of any emotional weight they carry. Contrast them with **'Ten Cents A Dance'** or **'Someday I'll Find You'** and the difference is immediately apparent. Unfortunately for Billy, the great mass of the public like sentiment and sentimentality and are likely to feel cheated without a supply of it. However, on their own terms the general level of the songs is musically pretty high, and any singer who feels inclined to try them is unlikely to be disappointed.