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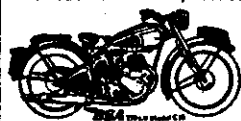
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BILLY MAYERL (left), the English rhythm pianist, in process of being interviewed from 22B by the curator of Wellington Zoo, **C. J. Cutler**. Both are members of the Royal Zoological Society, and the subject under discussion was, appropriately enough, Mayerl's "Aquarium Suite"

NIMBLE-FINGERED GENTLEMAN

"YES, that's true, I *did* play the whole of the Grieg Concerto at the Queen's Hall, London, when I was six, with the Trinity College Students' Orchestra; but then, youth has no shame," said a dapper little man to *The Listener* when he was passing through Wellington the other day. He was the British pianist Billy Mayerl—A *Nimble-Fingered Gentleman*, to use the title of one of his own compositions. That, he said, was 40 years ago, and he recalled that to his young ears the orchestra sounded completely out of balance, as if there were "about 90 fiddles, three horns and one double-bass," and his piano seemed to be a voice crying in the wilderness.

New Zealand radio listeners know many of his compositions—*Marigold*, *The Four Aces*, *Insect Oddities*, and, of course, the *Aquarium Suite*, which most pianists may have tried out in their lighter moments. How he came to write that one is interesting. Billy Mayerl has always liked fish, as much for their fascinating movements in the water as for their flavour. Some years ago he constructed a pond in the garden of his home in Hampstead, England. It looked a bit bare, so he filled it with Prussian carp, tench, Moorish idols ("funny little fellows, these"), fantails, and shubunkins which will feed from the hand.

"At first I knew nothing about freshwater fish; they caught all sorts of diseases and died off one by one. Somebody told me there was not enough aeration in the water, so I bought an electric pump," he explained. "That didn't do much good, so after a lot of experimenting, trial and error, I went in for glass tanks, and so cured the fish of all their ailments!"

"And those tanks of fish suggested the *Aquarium Suite*?"

"In a way. Composers are always casting about to find new ideas and then to hit on good titles for their works. The aquarium, with its willow-moss, other pretty vegetation, and highly mobile inhabitants suggested a subject to write music about, so away I went. I thought of calling the thing *Fish*, but it sounded a bit crude, so what better than *Aquarium Suite*?"

Mayerl, who is, incidentally, a Fellow of the Royal Zoological Society, has been composing for nearly 40 years. His first recording was an old-timer which opened with the words, "Edison-Bell reccud," and scratched and wheezed its way round the cylinder. He has published more than 1000 compositions, including several musical comedy scores, music for 30 or so films and a number of orchestral suites. "Just now I'm well behind with my publishers. I haven't written a thing for six months," he said.

Asked if he had given a name to his special type of playing Mayerl said that many people had asked him that question. "I don't know what you would call it. I was brought up in the highbrow school. In the early days jazz was a pretty low sort of thing from the musical point of view, so I thought that if I could combine the classical style of playing with a certain amount of syncopation, I might turn out some noises that would be pleasant to listen to. Boogie-woogie? No, I'm not interested. Bebop? Why, there's nothing new about that. We did it when we were kids years ago, full of enthusiasm and not caring a hoot what tune the other chap was playing. The professionals of to-day do it better, that's all."

Recounting his worst moment during his 40 years as a pianist, Mr. Mayerl mentioned an incident which occurred during the war. "The BBC was dodging about all over the place to get out of

(continued on next page)