

George Melachrino

A special “light music” feature by
Tony Clayden



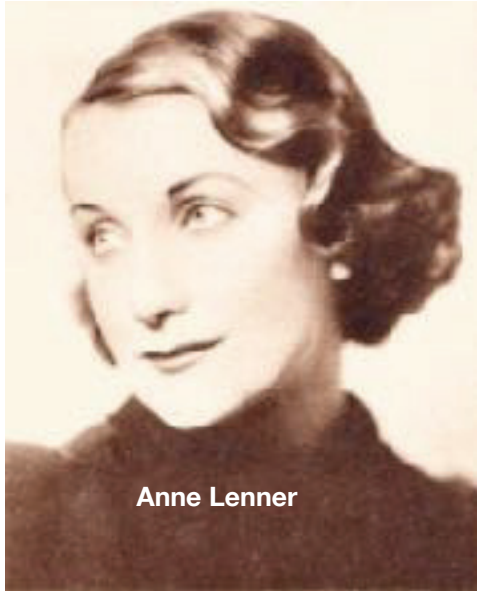
George Melachrino headed one of the finest British Light orchestras in the years following World War Two. Due – in no small measure – to the introduction of the Long Playing record at that time, his fame rapidly spread throughout the globe,

particularly in North America, where his albums sold literally millions of copies.

He was born George Militades in London, England, in 1909, of a father of Greek and Italian descent and an English mother. By the age of four, he was being taught by his stepfather, a theatre orchestra conductor, on a miniature violin, and only a year later he began composing. At age thirteen he made his first public appearance as a solo violinist.

Melachrino enrolled at Trinity College of Music, [where one of his fellow students was Annunzio Mantovani], and won particular praise for his work with strings, which would later bring him great acclaim. He became an accomplished player of the violin, viola, oboe, clarinet and saxophone and eventually learned to master virtually every orchestral instrument except the piano and the harp.

He also had a pleasant singing voice, and began his career performing on early BBC radio broadcasts from the Savoy Hill studios in London. It is believed that Carroll Gibbons assisted in this regard by paying for some of George's singing lessons.



with Anne Lenner were particularly popular.

In 1927, at age 18, he was appointed lead violinist for the then-recently formed Mantovani Quintet, which performed at the Hotel Metropole, a post he held for a year. Around the same time,

he could be found playing saxophone on recordings made by a small independent company in South London. It seems that there was plenty of work available around that time for a substantial group of 'freelancers'.

In common with several of his contemporaries, Melachrino discovered that his talents were well suited to the demands of the British dance bands which flourished during his youth. In numerous broadcasts and recordings, he performed on the instruments mentioned above, and as a most competent vocalist.

By 1938, Melachrino was being accorded star billing for his BBC broadcasts, and the following year he formed his own dance orchestra, which had secured a contract to perform at the famous Café de Paris in London.

Whilst still in his teens, by 1926, he was recording with Geoffrey Gelder and his Kettner's Five, and during the following years, he would work with Ambrose, Harry Hudson, Jack Jackson, Van Phillips, Rudy Starita, Jay Wilbur, Marius B. Winter and Carroll Gibbons, with his Savoy Orpheans. Gibbons made him one of his 'star' vocalists, and his duets

The start of World War Two interrupted his career, although it helped to steer him in a slightly different direction musically speaking. He had joined the Army and soon received training in the

Corps of Military Police, where he became a PT instructor. However, following a back injury, he was drafted back into broadcasting and tasked with providing special shows for the troops overseas.

Melachrino became Musical Director of the Army Radio Unit and toured with the 'Stars In Battledress', forming a 50-piece 'Orchestra in Khaki' which employed some of the finest professional musicians serving in the forces. He enjoyed considerable artistic freedom, which enabled him to perform a wide variety of music.

In 1944, Regimental Sergeant Major George Melachrino became conductor of the British Band of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, working alongside Major Glenn Miller and Captain Robert Farnon, who fronted the US and Canadian bands respectively.

[Note that the British Army didn't consider that their top musician should be a commissioned officer !]

There is an intriguing story about how the wartime Melachrino style

evolved. His senior at the War Office, Eric Maschwitz, of *A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square* fame, said he wanted to hear *Pennsylvania Polka* played by an orchestra of 80. So Melachrino's



AEF band was upgraded to include 80 musicians, making it the first to introduce sweet, sentimental mood music by the use of masses of strings.

Each of the three AEF bands developed its own special

style, building up a large following with the civilian population at home, as well as with the troops who were the main intended audience. The British band gained a tremendous reputation, and Melachrino himself sang with all three service bands.

His own composition, *First Rhapsody*, opened and closed each programme when the British band started broadcasting to Europe. Written in 1936, it was originally a serious work for orchestra lasting over seven minutes. For use as his signature tune, Melachrino adapted the principal theme and

reconstructed the work, making it shorter and more popular in character. It was subsequently arranged in various forms, notably for solo piano and also for piano and orchestra. A British Film, *House of Darkness*, included the story of how *First Rhapsody* came to be written.

Upon the cessation of hostilities, a number of erstwhile members of Melachrino's AEF band formed the nucleus of a magnificent new orchestra which would go on to achieve world-wide fame for the next twenty years. The accent was now firmly on strings, and it was in the field of string orchestration that George particularly excelled. Such was his popularity that he was invited to appear in the 1948 Royal Variety performance.

The Melachrino Organisation, as it soon became, would grow into one of Britain's most important musical empires, which included a number of orchestras and ensembles.

From 1945-1947, George conducted for Richard Tauber on most of Tauber's Parlophone recordings and BBC

broadcasts.

His exceptional talent has been preserved in a multitude of recordings. The post-war orchestra made around 100 '78' records, in addition to more than 50 LPs. Many of the latter were recorded in London for RCA Records, exclusively for the US market and not intended for release in the UK. He began to appear regularly on BBC radio broadcasts, often featuring light classics and popular 'standards' of the day.

Melachrino's repertoire included many of his own arrangements and compositions, and he competed with Mantovani in targeting the post-war 'Easy Listening' audiences. He was also in demand from cinema producers, scoring the music for

over a dozen feature films, whilst his contribution to the world of the theatre included the score for the 1947 London Hippodrome revue *Starlight Roof*, with the book by Matt Brooks and the aforementioned Eric Maschwitz, and starring Pat Kirkwood, Vic Oliver and the twelve-year-old Julie Andrews. The



The young Julie Andrews

Starlight Roof Waltz, performed by the Melachrino Orchestra, became very well-known, and was used as the signature tune for the Dutch equivalent of BBC Radio's *Housewives' Choice* from 1949-1974.

A gifted composer, Melachrino contributed a number of works to EMI's Recorded Music Library which existed for a while in the late 40s and early 50s. This was formed to provide themes and background music for films, radio and television world-wide, in competition with established publishers' libraries such as those of Chappells, Boosey and Hawkes and Bosworths.

In 1956, he reached number 18 in the UK singles chart with his recording of *Autumn Concerto*, which remained in the chart for nine weeks.

In later years, much of Melachrino's arranging work was entrusted to his musical associate William Hill-Bowen, a composer and conductor in his own right, whose orchestra regularly appeared on BBC Radio broadcasts. George recorded some of Hill-Bowen's compositions, including *Paris Metro*, *Paris Promenade*, and *Park Avenue Waltz*.

Also featured on many of Melachrino's recordings were *Great Show Medleys*. Amongst these may be found numbers he assembled

from *The King and I*, *The Dancing Years*, *Kismet*, *Guys and Dolls* and *The Pajama Game*, all arranged and presented in his distinctive and instantly recognisable style.

George Melachrino was married three times. His first wife and two sons, aged 12 and 15 lost their lives in a flying-bomb raid during the war. Afterwards, he devoted much of his time to helping sick children. His second marriage was dissolved, and in 1961 he had a son by his third wife, the former ballet dancer Noreen Lee.

Most unfortunately, and in common with so many others in the Music Profession, Melachrino fought – and ultimately lost – the 'battle of the bottle'. In a state of considerable intoxication, he fell asleep in his bath and drowned at his London Home, in Gordon Place, Kensington, on June 18th, 1965, at the tragically early age of 56.

Upon hearing the news, his publisher John Wallington – prophetically – said 'George's death is a great loss to me and to the world of light music. I'm sure that his music will continue to be played as long as Light Music is played'.

Sydney Grace, head of variety in the Grade Organisation, said 'I admired him immensely for his talent and his bright way of life. He was, I think, the instigator of the 'tumbling

strings', which he evolved during the war'.

Perhaps such sweeping statement requires some qualification. In the 1930s, the likes of Louis Levy in the UK, and Andre Kostalanetz in the US, were fronting orchestras where the strings were but one, [albeit important], component within the entire ensemble. Melachrino had been fortunate during his Army years in being able to call upon vast numbers of strings, with no worries about the cost, which would otherwise have become a significant – indeed, probably prohibitive – factor. Massive sales during the early years of the LP era still permitted light orchestras to employ large numbers of string players, [as well as Melachrino, one immediately also thinks of Mantovani], but gradually more sophisticated recording techniques enabled the same effects to be achieved with fewer players.

George Melachrino left a wonderful legacy of recordings which many lovers of Light Music have begun to appreciate anew. His work, as a composer, arranger and conductor, always bore the hallmark of quality, and he proved without doubt that it

was not necessary to resort to cheap gimmicks in order to be able to sell records.

It is a tragedy that he was taken from us at the time when he still must have had much to offer. We can only be very grateful that, for almost twenty years, his orchestral output was prolific; there are many examples of the work of a very talented musician waiting to be rediscovered by his appreciative admirers, old and new.

With due acknowledgement to, and in affectionate memory of, the late David Ades who did so much to promote the genre of light music.

Alice Mann

**George
Melachrino**

