



1894-1950

E J Moeran - from The Music Bulletin (1924)



by Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock)

Jack Wilkes, the famous member for Middlesex, once remarked to Dr Johnson that "*there is something in names which one cannot help feeling. Now Elkanah Settle sounds so queer, who can expect much from that name? We*

should have no hesitation to give it for John Dryden in preference to Elkanah Settle, from the names only, without knowing their different merits." It does very often happen that one reads a man's name repeatedly in the newspapers before one has any knowledge of his work or his personality, and from the name itself an impression of its owner is made on the mind which in some cases is apt to colour, all unconsciously, our subsequent opinion of him. Now it is the aim of every ambitious young author or composer to keep his name before the public, and he is fortunate if that name is one that is easy to pronounce and to remember and, moreover, a name that arouses pleasurable anticipation when it is heard and read. I must confess that when I first encountered the name of E J Moeran in the Daily Telegraph some years ago, no clear impression was made upon my mind. In the first place there is something cold and inhuman in the indication of the Christian name by a mere initial. A good tradition has ordained that composers shall be more than N or

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M until such time as fame bestows on them the dignity of a surname tout court. J S Bach is admissible - though the sonorous Johann Sebastian is vastly preferable; but R V Williams gives but a distorted image of a personality singularly clear in its full denomination; and the monstrosity of F A T Delius has never even been perpetrated by those who are pedantic enough to announce a work by W A Mozart. In the case of Moeran, the nationality of the name is dubious at first sight; it is actually Irish (though not in accordance with Gaelic orthography); but the oe suggests the Teutonic modified o as in Koeln - or again, might be pronounced as in oesophagus. Whereas when we hear of Jack Moran (with the accent on the Mor) all is clear at once and a personality is apparent. It sounds so delightfully unlike a professional musician - and one might spend many pleasant hours in Moeran's company without discovering that, officially at any rate, he was an accounted one.

His strength as a composer lies in the fact that he is a human being first and a musician afterwards. A man of many interests, he does not - for example - compete in an arduous motor-cycling reliability trial in the vague hope that this exercise may somehow improve his music; nor did he begin his career as a musician in the spirit of the small boy who, when asked by his schoolmaster what he was going to be when he grew up, replied: "An author, sir!" and was met with the frown: "But supposing you can't *auth*?" - a contingency the young mind had not envisaged.

Moeran began writing music when a boy at Uppingham. He had heard a good deal at school concerts and elsewhere, and thought it would be fun to try and produce some out of his own head. In fact, one may say that he learned composition simply by practising it. Of all the English public schools, Uppingham seems to provide the most favourable conditions for the development of musical tastes. The music master occupies a position second only to that of the head master in importance, and the boys are encouraged to develop a living interest in music, quite apart from any lessons in instrumental playing to which they may be committed. During the four years spent at Uppingham (1908-12) Moeran achieved considerable proficiency as a pianist; he also mastered the technique of the violin sufficiently well to be able to take part in performances of chamber music, and, under the sympathetic guidance of Robert (grandson of Sir William) Sterndale Bennett, he learned also how to listen intelligently,

how to read and absorb music - far more important accomplishments than the mere ability to perform it - so that by the time he left the school he had gained a very fair knowledge of what are called the classics, from Bach to Brahms.

[\[See also Sterndale Bennett's obituary of Moeran, 1951\]](#)

Beyond Brahms he had not pursued his investigations. He felt no curiosity about the music of his contemporaries; even Wagner was unknown to him. But chance came to his assistance one night in the spring of 1913 when, finding himself crowded out of St. Paul's Cathedral where Brahms' "Requiem" was to be given, he went to Queen's Hall to hear a concert, rather than hear no music at all. This was one of the admirable series given by Balfour Gardiner - concerts that will long be remembered in the annals of British music, though they were insufficiently appreciated at the time they were given - and the programme contained the Delius Piano Concerto, which accomplished for Moeran the same sort of miracle that "Tristan" and certain works of Greig had effected for Delius in the eighties, and revealed a new world of sound to his imagination.

He then spent a year at the Royal College of Music, joining the army at the outbreak of war, was severely wounded in France in May 1917, and after his recovery was attached to the transport section of the R.I.C, remaining in Ireland until demobilised in 1919. Military service did not, however, entail a complete suspension of his musical activities. By the end of the war he had acquired considerable facility on the technique of composition, and had a fair amount of chamber music to his credit. But still feeling a little unsure of himself he had some lessons from John Ireland, for whose work he had conceived a particular admiration. It was about this time that Moeran discovered that the tradition of folk-singing was still vigorously alive in the district of Norfolk in which he had lived from his eighth to his twentieth year. His familiarity with the neighbourhood gave him facilities which are often denied to the stranger, and his collection of songs, which now number considerably over a hundred, is undoubtedly one of the finest that has yet been made in any part of the kingdom. There has certainly been no collector who has entered more whole-heartedly into the spirit of the old tradition. He collects these songs from no antiquarian, historical, or psychological reasons, but because he loves them and the people who sing

them. It is of no more interest to him whether a tune be referable to this, that or the other mode, or whether a variant of its words is to be found on some old broadside, than it is to the singers themselves. For him, as for them, the song itself is the thing - a thing lives, a part of the communal life of the country; and, indeed, it is a much more heartening musical experience to sit in a good country pub and hear fine tunes trolled by the company over their pots of beer than to attend many a concert in the West End of London. It is no good appearing suddenly at a cottage-door, notebook in hand, as if you might be the burn-bailey or sanitary inspector, and - if you manage to overcome the singer's stage fright at all - holding up your hands in pious horror at any verses of a song which may conflict with the alleged tastes of a suburban drawing-room; nor should you spoil the ground for other collectors (as someone has tried to do in Norfolk, it seems) by forgetting that old throats grow dry after an hour's singing. The scholarly folk-lorist has his own reward, but he does not get in touch with the heart of the people. Perhaps the finest tribute that could be paid to Moeran's personal popularity in the district was the remark of an old man at Sutton after a sing-song to which Moeran had brought a visitor from London: "We were a bit nervous of him; with you it's different, of course - you're one of us - but he was a regular gentleman, he was."

[\[See also Moeran's article "Folk Songs and some Traditional Singers in East Anglia", 1946\]](#)

Of the "[Six Folk-songs from Norfolk](#)" arranged for voice and piano (Augener) which were first sung on the concert platform (and inimitably well sung) by John Goss at South Place last winter, three are quiet perfect specimens of the English tradition in its purest and most beautiful form. These are "Down by the Riverside", one of the most natural 5/4 tunes imaginable (incidentally 5/4 is quite a favourite measure in Norfolk, and any suspicion of it being a possible distortion of tripe or quadruple time is dispelled by the decisive thump with which mugs come down on the table or boots come down on the floor to mark the rhythm); "The Shooting of his Dear," which is an excellent example of Moeran's characteristically free but always appropriate methods of harmonisation; and "Lonely Waters," which he has treated in a more extended manner in a [very attractive little piece for small orchestra](#).

The influence of English folk-song is naturally apparent in many of Moeran's original compositions,

notably in the spacious and impressive "[Rune](#)" for piano (Augener), in his admirable setting of "[The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair](#)" (Oxford University Press), and in the principal theme of his first orchestral "Rhapsody" which - presented by the bassoon in its upper octave - will always appeal to the ribald as the ideal tune for all Limericks. There are occasional traces also of the very different and rather less salutary influence of Gaelic folk-song. It is an influence that is too easily over-worked and, although there are undoubtedly many whom no melody that suggests a Scottish or Irish origin can fail to enchant, there are others to whom the all-too-frequent appearance of pentatonic tunes in our music of recent years recalls the story Robert Burns tells of a gentleman who "expressed ambition to compose a Scots air" and was told to "keep to the black keys of the harpsichord, and preserve some hind of rhythm, and he would infallibly compose a Scots air." But Moeran has far too strong a vein of original melodic invention to rely overmuch upon this too facile resource.

Of his original compositions the most important that have yet appeared in print are the [Violin Sonata](#) and the [String Quartet](#) which were first introduced to the public at the concert of his works given at Wigmore Hall early in 1923 with the co-operation of Miss Harriet Cohen, M. Désiré Dufauw, and the Allied String Quartet. Both works have three or four predecessors in the form lying in manuscript, which accounts for the entire absence of any of the signs of technical limitation and uncertainty which are often conspicuous in a composer's earliest publications. Both display a notable wealth of ideas very completely expressed, but the quartet is undoubtedly the more original work of the two. In the Sonata the texture and disposition of notes in the piano part, as well as certain harmonic progressions, betray too obviously the composer's intimate acquaintance with the work of [John Ireland](#), and several pages are conceived in a turgid style which contrasts very markedly with the delightful clarity and simplicity of the Quartet. Moeran has a fine harmonic sense, wide in its range and subtle in its workings, intuitive and quite untheoretical, but in his piano writing it occasionally runs away with him at a moment of stress and defeats its own object by producing a blurred and clotted effect. But these lapses are not of frequent occurrence, and in the "[Toccata](#)" (Chester) we have as brilliant - and in its middle section, as sensitive - a piece of piano writing as any British

composer has given us.

Moeran's classical predilections have fortunately secured him from the too common error of supposing that a piece of music can consist exclusively of a series of curious chords. His work is always distinguished by clear melodic outlines and firm rhythmic structure, and if in his chamber music he adheres very largely to traditional forms, the admirable continuity of line and sense of climax displayed in his smaller pieces afford ample proof that this adherence is far from being servile or mechanical. In spite of his tendency to work outwards, so to speak, from a purely harmonic basis, he contrives very ingeniously to impart a quasi-contrapuntal vitality to the texture of his piano-writing by means of little wayward inflections of rhythm; even in his most massive progressions of heavy chords the sense of direction and line always predominates over the more harmonic interest of the moment.

If there is an emotional shortcoming in his work, it is that where we might look for passion we find only restless energy and a rather physical sort of exuberance; but in his quieter moments he has contrived, like Butterworth, to capture and reflect in his music in a very delightful and individual way something of the indefinable spirit of the English landscape and the life of the English countryside. There is a refreshing open-airiness about his music which is as untainted by the futility of academic prejudices as it is unaffected by the stupendous musical revolutions which take place on the continent with monotonous regularity two or three times every week.

Moeran is at present in his thirtieth year. Dr. Ernest Walker, in his "History of Music in England," suggests forty as the earliest age at which a composer can challenge opinion of his work as a whole; and in recent generations British musical talent seems to have come very slowly to maturity. The reputations of Delius, Elgar, and Vaughan Williams, for example, would be slender indeed, did they depend entirely on works composed before the age of thirty. But there is no British composer from whom we may more confidently expect work of sound and enduring quality in the next ten years than from Jack Moeran; there is certainly no one of his years who has as yet achieved so much.

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