



**Complete Solo Folksongs arranged by E.J.Moeran
Adrian Thompson (tenor), Marcus Farnsworth (baritone),
John Talbot (piano). BMS 438CD**

At the Aldburgh Festival in June 1948, a song recital was given by members of the English Opera Group, which included folksong arrangements by Britten, Moeran & Vaughan Williams; plus songs by Ethel Smythe and Roger Quilter. Most of VW's hundred or so folksongs are arranged for choirs (which would sell more copies than solo versions!), with exception of the *Six English Folksongs* for voice and piano of 1935, so it was probably these that were performed in the concert. In fact most British composers chose the choral option, so Moeran and Britten were an exception to the general rule - along with Charles Stanford's and Herbert Hughes' settings of Irish songs.

The families of Britten (Suffolk) and Moeran (Norfolk) were friendly in the mid-30s: there is a photo of both sunbathing on the beach at Lowestoft in 1934; and Moeran and his mother were at the premiere of Britten's *Our Hunting Fathers* at Norwich in 1936, where they were joined for lunch by VW and the composer. It may even have been Moeran's suggestion that Britten should study at the Royal College of Music with his old teacher, John Ireland; and Britten turned to Moeran for advice about folksongs used in the film *Around the Village Green*, in 1936. Moeran also sprang to Britten's defence when he left England for the USA during the world war, after an attack on him in the *Musical Times* by the editor, Harvey Grace, in 1941, writing: *Provided that he keeps his artistic integrity, I consider that he is doing his duty by remaining where he is. The death of Butterworth in 1915 was a tragedy, the nature of which no country with any pretensions to the preservation of culture and a respect for art can afford a recurrence.* Moeran's nobility in this is shown by the fact that he did not like much of Britten's music by then!

His collecting of folksongs started in 1915, just before he embarked for France as a Lieutenant to serve as a despatch rider in the Great War. This seems to have been triggered by being unable to get into St Paul's Cathedral for a concert of one of Bach's Passions early in 1914, whereupon he went down reluctantly to Queen's Hall for a concert of British music, and heard VW's *Norfolk Rhapsody* - based on folk music from the area where Moeran had spent most of his life. He said that VW's music *seemed to breathe the very spirit of the English countryside*, and the next day went to buy a copy of Cecil Sharp's *Folk Songs from Somerset*. He resumed collecting in 1921, while studying with John Ireland, and published his

first set of *Six Folksongs from Norfolk* in 1924. Two of these songs were used in subsequent compositions: *Lonely Waters* for small orchestra, and *The Shooting of his Dear*, which formed the main theme of the first movement of his symphony in G minor. The Norfolk set begins with a song in 5/4 time, *Down by the Riverside*, and Moeran evokes the mood of a calm June day perfectly in his piano introduction as a prelude to this love story. *Lonely Waters* is a variant of the song VW put into his *Penguin Book of English Folksongs*, though here the modal tune starts in the minor, and ends in the major. The third slow song, *The Shooting of his Dear*, is in the Dorian mode, and tells the sad tale of a young fowler who accidentally shoots his sweetheart, mistaking her for a swan. Three fast songs alternate with these, and are set more ruggedly, befitting topics such as naval warfare.

The next group of seven songs is a collection of individual ones written at various times, starting with what is one of his earliest compositions - dated April 1915 and written in the style of a folksong, but to a poem by Fox Smith about minesweepers - *The North Sea Ground*. This group includes the well-known, *High Germany*, though with a less familiar tune, plus a couple of gentle love-stories; and three songs with choruses joined by the *Weybridge Male Voice Choir*. Moeran's next designated set was the *Six Suffolk Folksongs*, published in 1932, which he dedicated to Roger Quilter, whose family home was at Bawdsey Hall in the county. The set begins with *Nutting Time* a teasing tale of a *fair young maiden* and a *brisk young farmer*, in the county of Kent (the home of cob-nuts), which also usefully rhymes with *went!* All the songs but one are about love in various aspects, and Moeran is faithful to the modality of the melodies, which sometimes appear to begin in one key and end in another; and also to the metre of the song, so that bar-lengths often change, as in *Cupid's Garden*, which has a few 5/4 bars. In *The Isle of Cloy*, we have a tragic tale of disappointed love, bringing some of Moeran's darkest chromatic harmonies. The set concludes with a lightweight song, *A Seaman's Life*.

After the war, Moeran spent more time in Ireland, where his father was born; and his final collection, *Songs from County Kerry*, was published only after his sudden death in 1950 at Kenmare. What is striking about these is the increase of decoration in the vocal lines, and the flexibility of metre, so that the time signature can change in almost every bar - even varying between simple and compound time. This is especially true in the first song, *The Dawning of the Day*, whose unusual subject is the cold and dark of winter for one who has to be at work before dawn. Those who know Ivor Gurney's songs will notice that the second song, *My Love Passed Me By*, opens with a nearly identical figure to *The Penny Whistle*, from his *Lights Out* set. Then follows the most dramatic song, *The Murder of Father Hanratty*, which Moeran sets in an Aeolian C minor, although it could easily have been done in E flat major, containing as it does some typical Irish plagal cadences. *The Roving Dingle Boy* is the only song in the major mode, telling the story of a sailor who returns home to marry his sweetheart, while *The Lost Lover*, whose melody switches between the Dorian and Aeolian modes, tells of another sailor who is drowned and lamented by his sweetheart. *The Tinker's Daughter* is a light-hearted romp in the Dorian mode, with a nonsense chorus of *with my gumshilla an a goushilla an me gashilla like*

a Leary O and a nice musical joke in verse 5, where the piano goes into 2/4, while the singer stays in 6/8. The final song, *Kitty, I am in Love with You*, is also a happy Jig in the minor, though, as the sixth note of the scale is not used in the melody, one cannot tell exactly which mode is suitable. Moeran always takes care to vary the harmonies to match changing moods in the verses, and these are done in subtle colours, compared with those of Britten, who prefers the bolder shades of a showman. The prevailing minor modes of the Kerry songs match Moeran's later works, such as the Cello Sonata and the Cello Concerto.

The two singers, Marcus Farnsworth and Adrian Thompson, are crystal clear in their diction, and bring constantly varied expression, giving vitality to the songs; and we owe a great debt to the pianist, John Talbot, who not only plays the piano superbly, but has rescued from near oblivion many fine works of Moeran through publication and recording, which had fallen out of print - thus reminding us of the sterling worth of this under-appreciated composer.

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